



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

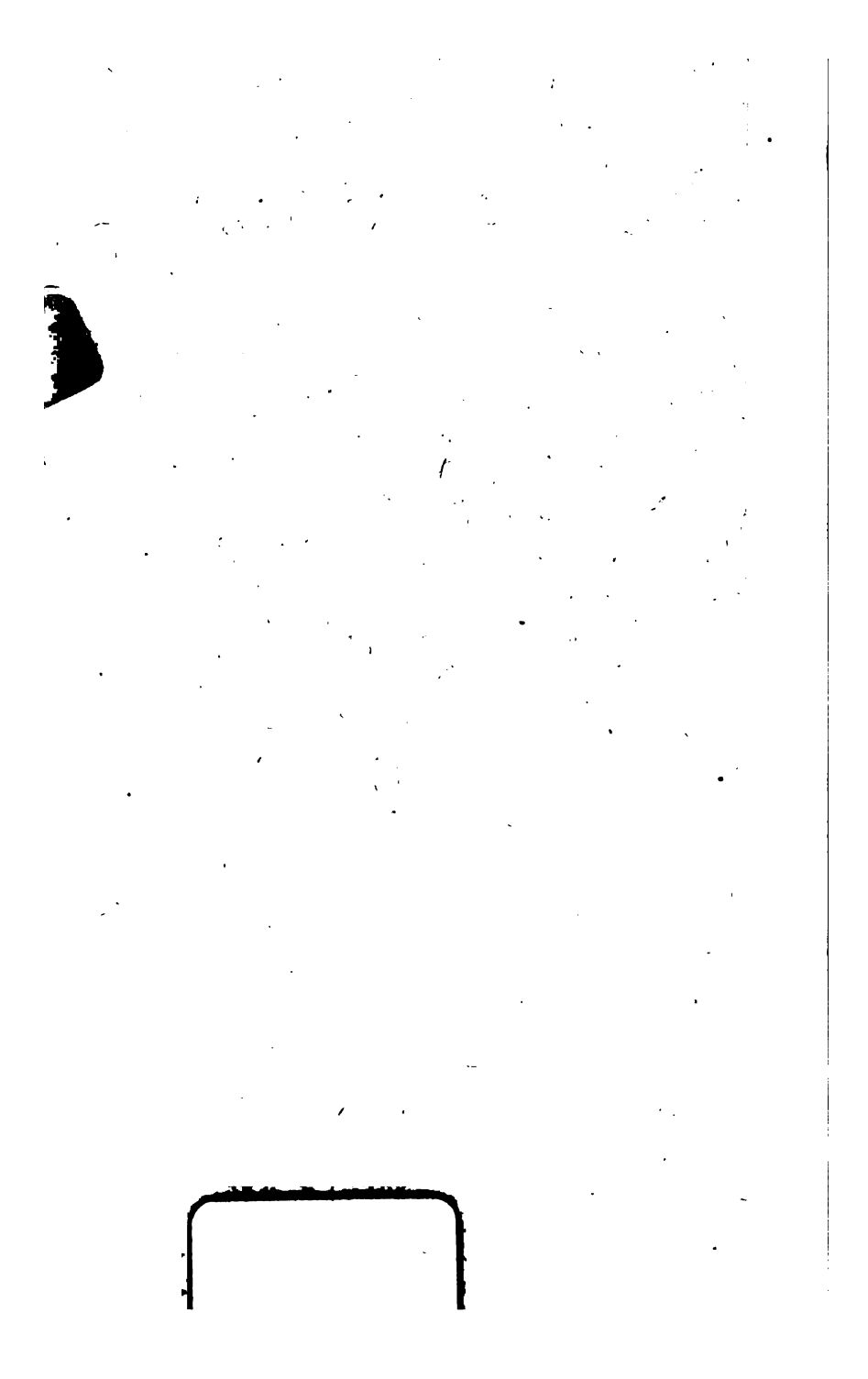
- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



3 3433 07487950 7



1000



DONATED BY THE
MERCANTILE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
NEW YORK CITY

Ward no
3/27/21 EQ

IDOLS

BY

WILLIAM J. LOCKE^{cc}



MERCANTILE LIBRARY,
NEW YORK.

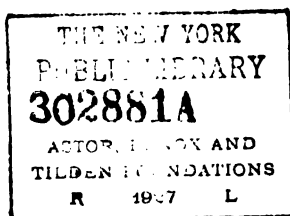
M351748

JOHN LANE: THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON AND NEW YORK

1899

A E

COPYRIGHT, 1990,
By JOHN LANE.



ROY W. B.
J. B. B.
B. B. B.

TO
J. S.
IN MEMORIAM
M. S.

380
210
VBA

IDOLS

PROEM

Two men once issued from the darkness and broke into a house. They came for robbery, but, finding an old man asleep in a chair, they murdered him. Then terrified at their deed, they fled, almost empty-handed, and so vanished into the night. Long afterwards they were overtaken by justice, confessed their crime and paid the penalty. Their sordid story is set down in the newspapers of the time. Otherwise they have passed into oblivion, and no man concerns himself with the dismal working of their souls. Their existence would not have found a mention here, were it not that the blow they dealt was the cause of convulsions in other lives.

For under the outer seeming of harmonious days and gentle living, often lies a smouldering train of devastating forces—stifled passions of greed and lust and jealousy, splendid heroisms and enthusiasms that burn white. In the common way of life no match is set ; which forms a trite moral for the elegist.

Idols

But now and then the way of life is lit with lurid suddenness and the mine is sprung.

Beneath the surface of four gentle lives such a train was smouldering. The vulgar crime of the two nameless abjects set it ablaze. And they, issuing from the darkness for one ghastly moment, were but blind, almost impersonal instruments of Destiny, so far as they concerned these four.

CHAPTER I

It was Irene Merriam's hour of greatest content when she looked into her heart for a fugitive desire and smiled at finding none. And this was a source of all the more comfort, because she was a woman who gave unsparingly of herself to life, and made large claims upon life in return. She sat in a leathern armchair by the fireplace, listening to the talk of her two companions, who were sitting by the dinner table over their coffee. Now and then she interposed a remark, but lazily, preferring to watch the play of expression on their faces, to dream dreams about them, and to realise her own happiness. This after-dinner scene was a familiar one; familiarity had made it dearer. She had grown to regard it as an

Idols

essential in her scheme of life, like sleep and food and raiment.

Of the two men, one was her husband, Gerard Merriam; the other, his life-long, intimate friend. They had chummed together at school, at the University; had joined the same Inn of Court, and had been called to the bar together; and in spite of wide divergence of taste and character, had remained in close relationship to the present day.

It was on the homeward voyage, after a Long Vacation trip to India, that they had met Irene, a lonely girl returning from the grave of a father whose death-bed she had gone out too late to witness. Both men fell in love with her. The rivalry becoming mutually obvious, each gave the other a fair field. The wooing continued in London till success fell upon Gerard. On his meeting with Irene after her marriage, the other, Hugh Colman, bowed low over her hand, kissed it and put a loyal friendship at her service. A proud bearing, emphasised by steel-blue eyes and a supercilious up-sweep of a heavy auburn moustache, gave distinction to the action. He had rather a courtly way of doing things. The tears started to her eyes. She had been greatly drawn to him before, and pitied him out of her girlish heart for having lost in his rivalry; but from that moment she loved him with a pure friendship, and made it a dear object of her life to intensify the brotherly affection between the two

Idols

men. In fact she had raised her conception of this Orestes and Pylades relationship to a kind of cult, of which she herself was the devoted and impassioned priestess. During the six years of her married life Hugh had dined with them at least once a week. Lately he had taken a flat in their immediate neighbourhood, and his visits had grown more frequent. Gerard, being a man of few words, had not said much to evince his gratification, but Irene had sounded the note of welcome loud enough for the two.

As she lay back in her chair watching them, a spice of admiration flavoured her thoughts. Both were men of fine physique. Gerard was six feet two, of huge frame, with deep, sloping shoulders indicative of great strength. Hugh, of somewhat slighter build, better proportioned, holding his head erect on square shoulders; finer, too, of face than Gerard, who had heavy features, eyes of uncertain blue and a reddish moustache cut short at the ends. The one face gave the impression of a man proudly scornful, quick in quarrel, with a Celtic strain of sensitiveness; the other that of a man slow in method, determined of purpose, shy of demonstration—one suggesting rather than revealing strength—a dangerous face to trust. Of the two, Hugh was pre-eminently the man more likely, on first sight, to win a woman's heart in a joint contest. Even Gerard himself had wondered at his success. When he questioned his wife, she answered,

Idols

lifting glorious eyes of faith, "Because you are you." And that was an end of the matter. But perhaps it was the suggestion of reserved strength in the man that had influenced her from the first in his favour, and an intuition, such as so many women have trusted like a divine revelation, that in a great crisis of life the one would be living rock and the other shifting sand.

A pause in the talk gradually lingered into silence. Gerard, at the head of the table, near Irene, manipulated his pipe, which had become choked and would not draw. Hugh, at the side, half turning towards the fire, leaned back in his chair, and, with hands clasped behind his head, stared at the ceiling. Irene suddenly spoke:

"How are the Harts?"

Hugh started into a more normal posture.

"The Harts? They flourish. Have you ever heard of a Jew money-lender who didn't?"

There was an unwonted touch of acerbity in his tone that brought a quick glance from Irene.

"They are not both money-lenders," she remarked.

"Oh, Minna—she is right enough."

"I'm sorry for the poor girl," said Irene. "I wish she would let me be a friend to her, but she won't. I wonder why."

"What do you want to worry about her for?"

Idols

asked her husband, between the whiffs of his newly regulated pipe.

"I pity her so."

"Some people don't like being pitied. I don't."

"But you are not a pretty girl cut by society," insisted Irene.

"She's proud, you know," said Hugh. He might have adduced a reason much nearer home. As it was, he gave a hint of it.

"The moon, Irene, pales as a matter of course before the sun; but it's an open question whether the moon likes it."

"You are talking rubbish," said Irene, calmly.

Gerard broke into a laugh.

"Anyway, I'm glad she hasn't cottoned to you. I don't like Jews about the place. To your tents, O Israel!"

Irene flashed up. "You can't object to the poor girl just because she is a Jewess!"

"Of course not, my dear," replied her husband, with a curious change of tone. "I was only joking."

Irene came behind his chair and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Forgive me, dear," she said.

He nodded, and patted the back of her hand magnanimously; then pushed his chair away from the table and rose to his feet, stretching himself after the manner of burly men.

Idols

"I'm off to the smoking-room to make up some trout casts. You two can come when you've finished the discussion."

When he had gone Irene took his vacated seat.

"The girl seems so lonely. That's why I take an interest in her."

Hugh lit a cigarette and replied vaguely. Irene noticed a lack of enthusiasm, and attributed it to a lack of interest. There was a short silence.

"Is anything the matter?" she said at last.

"Why should there be?"

"You are not yourself to-night. You have been working too hard and want a change. Why not go down to Weston's to-morrow with Gerard to fish?"

"Gerard hasn't asked me."

"As if that were necessary. I'll tell him at once you are going."

"Oh, no," he laughed. "I'm not to be regulated in that fashion. I'm not overworked. I'm as strong as a horse. If you want to know what I was thinking about, I'll tell you—more or less. I remembered it was just six years ago to-day when I first saw you after your marriage."

She looked meditatively towards the fire, a smile upon her lips.

"And I had just been thinking how happy these six years had been and how peaceful and sweet these

Idols

evenings were, the three of us together. Perhaps I have been selfish."

He caught the implication, and broke into protest.

"You know very well they are the happiest times of my life," he said. "Where else could I get what I have here?"

"I sometimes think it would be better for you if you could find a nice woman to give you something better," she said, somewhat timorously.

"Oh, don't talk like that, Renie," he cried, impetuously, throwing his cigarette into the fire. "The more I see of other women, the more I despair. I see a lot of them. I've been married to a half a dozen already, by popular rumour. I suppose I shall end one of these days by marrying one in grim earnest. I'm a fool, Renie, I know. But *que veux-tu?* My temperament is not that of an anchorite. I know how it will be. A whirl of the senses—and after that the deluge. And then I'll come back here and sit in this room and wonder how the devil I could have thought of another woman. You've spoiled me for the common run of women. I haven't met one yet that is fit to black your shoes. The man that worships the sun doesn't give his allegiance to a bonfire."

"But he can warm himself by the bonfire," replied Irene, laughing.

"Until the thing goes out. Then he's got to light another. But the sun is eternal."

Idols

She was accustomed to his hyperbole. The woman in her loved the praise. It supplemented Gerard's rarer tributes to her worth, effectually prevented her from feeling a lack in her husband's lesser demonstrativeness. Again, she was enlightened enough to allow relief to overburdened feelings. A man of his type could not love her to-day and cast her out of his heart to-morrow. She never had a moment's doubt that she was throned there as the love of his life. But a magnanimous scorn of thoughts of disloyalty on his part triumphed supremely over a false position.

In Hugh's present outburst, however, she detected some special determining cause.

"I'm a very limited being, my dear Hugh," she said quickly, "whatever exaggerations I let you use. But you know how deep my interest in your welfare is, and life could not go wrong with you without causing me—and Gerard—pain and anxiety. That was why I spoke. Whatever it is, I am sorry."

Sympathy could not have been more delicately conveyed than it was by her tone and look. But there are times when sympathy stings. He remained silent for a moment; then shifted his position, threw back his head and twirled his great moustache.

"You are everything that is sweet, Renie," said he. "But I was telling you general truths—not posing as *un homme manqué*. I hate the kind of fellows

Idols

that are forever mewing about for women's sympathy. It's despicable!"

He rose, and, with two arms held out, took her hands and raised her from her chair.

"There. Don't be hurt. Everything's going on swimmingly, I assure you. The world at my feet, and heaven at my finger tips. Let us go to Gerard."

The smoking-room was a nondescript apartment, half library, half gun-room, suggestive more of the country squire than the London barrister. Gerard, with a glass of water on a little table by his side, was engaged upon his casts, screwing up his eyes, so as both to avoid the smoke of his pipe and to see the delicate involutions of his knots. He looked up, with a nod, when his wife and friend entered. Irene turned to a desk to scribble a note. The men's talk turned upon fishing. Weston had killed a two-pound trout the day before. They discussed the chances of a similar prize for Gerard. Then came the question of flies. Gerard waxed learned. Irene, having written her note and finding herself out of the conversation, took up a book. Gerard's love of sport she indulgently allowed, but in her heart she could not sympathise with it. The wilful infliction of pain passed her comprehension. There was so much of it in the world already.

She was glad when she became aware of a change of topic, and drew her chair nearer the fire. But

Idols

Hugh, looking at his watch, rose to depart. Irene protested.

“So early? It is not ten o'clock yet.”

There was a touch of dismay in her tone. Gerard, too, bade him sit down again. But he pleaded work. He had been briefed in a hurry, had not a notion yet of the case which was coming on immediately.

They had to let him go, and when he had gone, fell to discussing him as they had done a thousand times before. Irene idealised and worshipped her husband, but her feelings towards Hugh were composed of conflicting and of somewhat delicate elements. The man's history, mode of life and diversity of character, appealed by turns to her sense of romance, of trust, of protection. He had squandered a pretty patrimony in his early days. A diamond brooch still glittered before the footlights on an oblivious bosom. He had lived open-handedly, benefiting more by his vices than many of the austere do by their virtues. Even now, with modest income at the criminal bar, small thrift was incomprehensible to him, in spite of Irene's periodical expositions. On such occasions she looked serenely down upon him from immeasurable heights. But in this man of so many simplicities, seemed to lie a baffling fund of reserve, which both compelled her respect and kept her intellectual interest in him upon the alert. The paradox fascinated her especially in its extension to

Idols

achievement. For with a habit of glowing speech he combined a severe literary taste. A reputation of some standing had been made and was upheld by poems wrought with crystalline coldness. On the other hand, a recent and sudden opening at the bar was chiefly due to tempestuous advocacy.

"You seem to be worrying your head over everybody to-night," said Gerard at last. "First it was Israel Hart's daughter and now it's Hugh. Whence this violent attack of altruism?"

"I have everything that life can give me, and I should like others to have the same. Now, there's something wrong with Hugh."

"There always is. A man can't have the temperament of an Ajax and expect to go through life smoothly."

"His friends can help him," said Irene.

"My dear, good Renie," said Gerard, slipping the last cast into his fly-book, which he strapped deliberately, "if there is one cry bitterer than another that goes up to heaven it is 'Save us from our friends!'"

CHAPTER II

THE Merriams lived in a comfortable detached house on Sunnington Heath, most convenient and pleasant of London suburbs. A year or so before they had persuaded Hugh Colman to leave his somewhat dismal chambers in the Temple and take a flat in a block of red-brick mansions that had just arisen to glorify the end of the High Street of Sunnington proper. Irene, with a woman's eye to economy, had picked out for him a commodious little set on the fourth floor. But Hugh put aside her choice and rented a sumptuous flat lower down, which he furnished in expensive style. When Irene reproved him he laughed, with a grand-signorial wave of the hand. His pigsty and husk days were over. He was going to take advantage of the fatted calves and other resources of rehabilitated prodigals. Was not his income going up by leaps and bounds? Besides, there was his uncle, Geoffrey Colman, of Brantfield Park. He had more than expectations. Irene lectured him on the vanity of human expectations.

"Your uncle may marry again and have a family," she said, sagely.

Idols

Hugh snapped his fingers. It would be indecent. Geoffrey Colman had ever been the correctest of livers. He dressed for his solitary dinner every night of his life, on account of his butler. His marriage would convulse a whole neighbourhood. He would just as soon think of throwing a nitro-glycerine bomb into the parish church.

Irene yielded with a pitying shrug of the shoulders. She had not lived six and twenty years for nothing. She knew that in every man lurks something of Voltaire's droll of a Habbakuk. About eighteen months later her prognostications were fulfilled. Geoffrey Colman showed himself capable of anything by marrying a young wife. Quite recent rumours hinted at the probable arrival of an heir. All Hugh's expectations came to a ghastly end. Irene sympathised with him, made elaborate calculations as to means for reducing his expenditure. He listened with pathetic admiration—she had a regal way of taking impossible things for granted—acquiesced silently in her schemes and then went out and cursed himself.

To-night, after leaving the Merriams, he walked along in the same self-reproaching temper. The March wind, coming keenly across the heath, blew a small drizzle into his face, causing him to pull up his coat collar and step out briskly. He swung his stick with an irritation which, however, had nothing to do with the weather. If only the past had been different

Idols

—if only Irene had loved him instead of Gerard! He would have husbanded his life, instead of playing ducks and drakes with it as he was doing. What business had he along this road? Had he not better retrace his steps past the Merriams' house and go to his own study fire and his imaginary brief? Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of impatience, drew himself up and called himself a fool. A familiar recklessness of mood gained gradual hold upon him. He laughed, gratified at the possession of a sense of humour that could look mockingly upon the portentous seriousness of this ridiculous world.

He turned his thoughts to the cases he had in hand, went off at a tangent to the points he had made in an emotional address to the jury the day before. The success was sweet—sweeter because he was conscious that the secret of it lay within himself. He had the gift of eloquent speech—pathos, persuasion, invective. It had brought him suddenly, when his chance came, from the obscurest ranks of the junior bar, into public light. A pittance had leaped into a competence, which in its turn might rise to the dignity of an income. His temperament had done for him, a young and struggling man, what legal learning and acumen had not done for hundreds many years his senior. When he realised this, he felt grateful to his temperament, and granted it indulgence for the many scurvy tricks it had played him.

Idols

Accordingly, he was fairly satisfied with himself when, after a quarter of an hour's walk, he opened the garden gate of a large house standing in its own grounds. He walked up the drive humming an air. He rang, was admitted, conducted across a luxuriously carpeted hall, up a broad staircase, into the drawing-room.

"Mr. Colman, miss."

The servant withdrew and shut the door. A girl rose from a low chair by the fire and advanced with quick steps to meet him.

"Oh, how late you are—no, you couldn't help it. You told me. But the evening has been so long—waiting for you."

"I got away as soon as I could. You see, I had promised. If your note had come yesterday, instead of this morning——"

"I only knew last night that father was going out of town. It seemed too good a chance of having you all to myself. Oh, I am so glad you've come. It was good of you."

"By no means," he said, with a mock bow. "Don't you think it's a pleasure I've been looking forward to all day long?"

"I don't—if you express yourself in that sarcastic way," she answered, reseating herself.

Her voice was deep and rich, and she affected a lazy utterance—half aware that it might warm the

Idols

blood of the man she was addressing. It did. He had been irritably conscious of its seductiveness in Irene's dining-room; of the seductiveness, too, of her sensuous grace that had first caught his imagination. "You are a witch, Minna," he said, admiringly.

The echo in his ear of the threadbare commonplace sounded an ironical note. It pleased the girl, however.

"I have been longing for a little compliment for a week."

"Why, I saw you the day before yesterday."

"*Cela n'empêche pas.*"

"Did I behave badly to you?"

"No—but I might just as well have been selling you postage-stamps behind a counter."

"Forgive me. But, you see, we met in the street."

"You were ashamed of being seen with me, I suppose."

"Minna!" he exclaimed, flushing into quick earnest.

She laughed softly. "I thought I should get something genuine out of you—you walked into the trap beautifully. Do you like my new tea-gown? I had it made because you admired one something like it in a shop window."

She rose and stood before him. She was undeniably beautiful, with warm, southern beauty. From her mother, long since dead, whom chance had

Idols

brought from Smyrna to the tender keeping of Israel Hart and the fogs of London, she inherited the languor of expression that was her charm. Yet her features, more mutinous than regular, bore little or no trace of the Jewess—none, save that almost imperceptible, strange contour of flesh beneath the eyes, from cheekbone to cheekbone, which is the eternal mark of her race. The soft crepon of the garment clung to her figure, showing its young and supple curves. Its pale yellow shade heightened the richness of her colouring.

Hugh expressed unreserved admiration. He had the power of a nice extravagance in praise. The glow deepened on the girl's face and her eyes lit with gratification. After a quick glance at herself in the mirror of the over-mantel, she sat down again. Her heart had thirsted for his homage, and had drunk it in greedily.

"Now tell me all that you have seen and done lately," she said.

An easy task. He had seen no one lovelier than herself. He had sketched her portrait on brief-paper to bring a breath of sweetness into the evil-smelling court. He had the scrap in his letter case. Minna took possession of it, burst into roulades of delighted thanks. He laughed. Compared her murmurings to the low notes of the nightingale. The matter threshed out, Minna reverted to her original demand. He complied, touched on the gossip of the day, spoke

Idols

lightly of his forthcoming volume of poems. Would he write a poem to her? He tried to explain the severity of his style. Not flesh and blood. Perhaps on the tea-gown. Thus the talk was brought round again to the bewitching garment.

"And this—creation—was really to please me?" he asked.

"It's a godsend to have someone to think of pleasing," she cried, with sudden petulance. "Whom have I else? Papa and papa's friends? They never look at me unless I put on something barbaric—gold and silver and precious stones. Then they can reckon me up in pounds, shillings and pence. One grows weary of dressing for one's own pleasure. Life gets on one's nerves like a chapter out of the Book of Ecclesiastes—I don't suppose you ever feel like that—because you're a man."

"I wish I could make life less lonely for you," he said, kindly.

"I wish you could."

"Why do you keep Mrs. Merriam so at arm's length? She would do a great deal for you, if you would let her."

"I can't," said the girl. "I don't know why. Why do you think so much of her?"

"Because she is the finest woman I know."

"Or simply because——" she checked herself—
"No, I didn't mean that—but——"

Idols

"But what?"

"Oh, can't you guess? I want you to estimate me a little, by myself—not measure me by a standard—as you do—there!"

She leant forward, with one hand drooping over her knee, and looked up at him with moist eyes, and behind the moisture burned the longing folly of a woman.

"I don't want anybody else to please. You are enough for me. All the world."

Hugh had come prepared. Her sensuous charm had long woven itself around him. He had long known that a touch from him could awaken slumbering volcanoes; that in a moment of madness he would one day give that touch. Even now his pulses beat fast. He was flesh and blood, though his verse was marble. Yet he kept a curb upon himself. He reached out his hand and took her fingers.

"You mustn't look at me like that. I am not a bad man. But you will make me say things both of us may be sorry for."

"I don't care," she whispered. "Say anything."

The moment had come. In a fraction of a second he could have her youth throbbing in his arms. With an effort of will he threw back her hand and started to his feet. She shrank away frightened.

"Listen, Minna, before we make fools of ourselves. Where is this going to end? Have you

Idols

thought of it? Use your intelligence instead of your passions. I am speaking brutally to you. I know it. It's our only chance of salvation. You are throwing yourself away—into perdition perhaps. Do you know that?"

He stood, regarding her sternly; resolved to set her upon his own intellectual plane; to put before her serious issues; at the least, to throw open the flood-gates for her pride. Her face paled slightly, and she asked, with quivering lip:

"Don't you care for me—a little?"

He swung his arm in earnest gesture.

"Care for you? Of course I care for you. Do you suppose I should be here to-night if I didn't—not being a scoundrel?"

"Then why are you so unkind?"

"Because, though I love you in one way—there is only one woman whom I could love in all ways, and the woman isn't you. Simply that. If we let this go on, you would be giving all; I, a part. This can't be news to you. I love you because your beauty and charm fire my blood. It's Oriental in its simplicity. Have you thought of what the end of it might possibly be?"

The higher man suddenly had revolted against the readiness to seize the too willing prey, and had grown reckless in use of devastating weapons. He expected to see her facile southern nature rise in passionate

Idols

anger—or her womanliness shrink in tears of disgust from the insult. He would have acted a brute part. But in either case he would have laid her love dead at her feet. He waited. The unexpected happened. She looked at him doggedly out of hardened eyes from which all the languor had faded. And then she said, in her deep voice:

“I would sooner have a part of any kind of love from you than all the best love of any other man.”

He remained for a moment amazed at her strength. Had he conceived an insultingly wrong impression of her?

“Do you mean that you love me, in spite of the words I have just used?”

“Yes, I do,” she replied.

“I humbly beg your forgiveness,” he said in a low voice.

There was a long silence, broken only by the ticking of the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. The apparent vastness of the great drawing-room, stiffly furnished with its cold Louis XV. furniture, increased the impression of stillness. Hugh glanced at Minna from time to time, hesitating to speak. She had changed utterly from the glowing girl who had stood up before him an hour ago to coax his admiration for her finery. Her face was set with lines of determination and stubborn character. The riddle of the woman lay open to him who could read it. The false

Idols

light of the eternal, unutterably tragic missolution dawned upon the man.

"I have made a horrible mistake," he said at last.

"You have—in misjudging me."

"I meant that I have used cruel words. My justification was my intention. I wish I could make you some reparation."

"That is easy," she murmured.

"Name it."

"Ask me to marry you."

Marriage! At last he was brought brutally face to face with the problem that he had hitherto left, unconsidered, to fortuity. Indeed he grew conscious that marriage had been but vaguely contemplated. He had persuaded himself into a belief in his own honour. The rottenness of the belief stared at him hideously. The nakedness of his desire appeared before him, stripped of its glamour.

He despised himself, put her on moral heights beyond his reach. To ask her in marriage would be an added insult. And her money! A queen's dowry. The very temptation to retrieve his fortunes therewith was an ugly and abhorrent thing. He ran the gauntlet of all these thoughts. Emerged with rebellion in his soul; seized angrily at the first unhonoured standard to his hand. Marriage—with the daughter of Israel Hart, the Jew money-lender. It was impossible.

Half divining this last mood, she came to where

Idols

he sat, knelt down and placed her clasped hands on his knee. Her eyes dwelt upon him, softening adorably. Andrea del Sarto might have painted her.

"Why don't you speak? I have offended you? Asked for too much? Indeed, I didn't expect it. I am a Jewess and your people will despise me—and my father's a money-lender—it would be a disgrace to you. I was willing—ready—only——"

The standard fell from the man's hand. He yielded, utterly disarmed. The woman conquered as she surrendered to his embrace.

"If I took your love and the gift of yourself," he said, "and did not marry you—just because you were Israel Hart's daughter—I should loathe myself. My child, I thought you a toy—I find you a woman—worthy to be any man's wife."

"It would be sweet to be only yours," she murmured.

He kissed her again, then released her gently.

"If I asked you to marry me now, I should be committing a base action—for other reasons. Try to understand them. I am very badly off for money. You are an heiress. And I owe your father £5,000 on a reversion, which no longer exists. I scrape together the interest. It is not heavy—your father has treated me as a friend and not as a client. But he has been reproaching me with the rottenness of the security. Until I am clear of him, at least, I can't ask you to marry me."

Idols

Minna broke into happy laughter.

"You foolish fellow! Don't you see the obvious way of settling it? If you married me, the debt would be dissolved—in its own juice, so to speak."

His pride revolted. Impossible! It was mere trickery. Any honest man would cry out upon him.

She could not see the point of honour. Her training had not sensitised her perceptions in such things.

"What is to be done then?" she asked. "You won't take me without making me your wife—and you won't make me your wife on account of my money. I don't believe you want me at all."

After what had passed there was but one answer to be given. At the end she smiled up at him and whispered:

"That was very sweet; but it doesn't tell us what is to be done."

He glanced at the clock. "The thing to be done is to say 'Good-night'—and for you to go to sleep happy. I will find some way out of it. And I will bind myself to you forever, by this kiss. There."

So they parted; and he walked home with the softness of her young lips upon his, wondering what the devil was going to happen next. On the whole, happy. Quite unconscious that he had been fooled to the top of his bent by the instinctive wiles of a woman, herself merely carried away by an unregulated, headlong passion.

CHAPTER III

MEANWHILE a problem of some complexity remained to be solved. Hugh devoted the morning's clear-headedness to vain attempts at solution. From the position in which he found himself there was no issue without a loss of honour. The prospect chafed him like a hair-shirt. If he had erred, in times past, far from the paths of the homely virtuous, he had at least despised the crooked ways of the smugly vicious. He had been the thief of no woman's virtue. Such remnants of it as had come into his possession he had paid for right royally. There is a difference between sinning *en prince* and sinning *en voyou*, in spite of the moralist. Hugh was an honourable man. At least, he desperately clung to such a conception of himself. Three courses lay open. To abandon Minna altogether, to make her his mistress, to make her his wife. By adopting any one of these, he would find himself forsworn.

He journeyed up to his chambers in a denunciatory attitude of mind. Subjects for anathema were plentiful. His own folly in borrowing the £5,000 from Israel Hart; his greater folly in incurring the debts

Idols

towards the payment of which that sum had been mainly devoted; his uncle for having played this April fool's trick upon him, and, lastly, the fate that had robbed him of Irene—a clause that invariably terminated his commination. Three solid, middle-aged city men were travelling in his compartment. They appealed to his fancy as potential Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. If he had lifted up his voice like Job, they would obviously have told him that it served him right. The parallel put him into a good humour.

Shortly after his arrival, a telegram came from Minna. Could she see him for a minute to-day? And if so, where? She could meet him at any place and at any hour. It was only to see that he was not vexed with her. She had passed a wretched night and was depressed. It was a long, impulsive message, regardless of the principles of condensation, and couched in German, so as not to become the common property of the young ladies at the Sunnington telegraph office. Hugh despatched an answer, making an appointment at three o'clock, in his chambers. At a quarter past, Minna appeared, blushing, introduced by the clerk. Her pretty apologetic air compelled reassuring endearments. Of course she was dearly welcome. The whole of the dingy room was lit up with her charms. The very wig-block was beaming at her. She laughed happily, turned towards the object indicated, and seized the wig. Would he put

Idols

it on for her to see? She would fix it herself. No, she didn't like him in it. • He looked too wise.

They had a lover's hour, vowed they would conjure light out of darkness and be each other's before long. A formal demand in marriage was out of the question. Israel Hart would not give his daughter to a penniless barrister and starveling poet, who owed him money. And Hugh's soul sickened at the thought of asking him. Besides he had expressed his desire that Minna should marry a friend of his, appropriately named Goldberg, who kept an extensive bucket-shop in Gracechurch Street. To inform her, father would put an end to everything. He would carry her off and shut her up like Danaë in a brazen tower, into which Goldberg would Zeus-wise insinuate himself—this time at Actisius's invitation. Hugh proposed a two years' private engagement, during which period he would bestir himself strenuously to make his fortune. Minna acquiesced, but only with the outside of her lips. She was not accustomed to wait for what she desired. And, for the matter of that, neither was Hugh. At any rate, things were moved a stage further during the visit. Before she departed, she desired of him perfect secrecy. He was to keep it from everybody—and Mrs. Merriam. He agreed.

"I shall certainly not tell Mrs. Merriam," he replied, dryly.

Idols

She cast him a quick, suspicious glance out of otherwise glowing eyes. Then she bade him farewell, and tripped through the door that he held open for her.

The following day was Sunday. Although the season was the end of March, there had been a sudden cold snap. In the night the temperature had fallen and the wind risen. The morning gave the spectacle of a blizzard, driving sleet and snow. Hugh laid down the rough pencilled scraps of the verses he had been polishing, and went to look disconsolately out of the window. The prospect was uninviting; scarcely anything visible through the vibrating screen of swift, horizontal grey lines. He had agreed to meet Minna at noon, weather permitting, in the little patch of wood that stretched behind The Lindens, her father's house, to more or less open country. The weather was hardly in a permissive mood. He felt that he could annul the engagement with a free conscience. It would be madness of Minna to expect its fulfilment. But knowing that a woman in love is capable of many madresses, he resolved to keep his tryst on the chance of being able to despatch her summarily home again. He started out, with ulster collar drawn up to his ears, and thick gloves, and strode fast through the gale along the deserted pavements. At the appointed spot in the wood he waited for a quarter of an hour. Minna did not come. He congratulated her on her common sense, greater than

Idols

his own, and retraced his steps. As he emerged from the branch lane leading from the wood on to the heath road, and meeting the latter at a point somewhat nearer the Merriams' house than The Lindens, he was passed by a hansom cab, the window of which was down. After a few yards, the trap door in the roof was pushed open and the cabman drew up. Hugh approached, and perceived through the side glass Irene's expectant face. On the window being pulled up, he saw her sitting in the chilliness of an indoor silk blouse, while by her side, huddled up in her sealskin jacket, was a dirty, emaciated, shivering little girl.

"What a lucky chance to have passed you!" cried Irene; "will you do something real kind for me?"

"Anything in the world. I suppose I'm to fetch a doctor," he replied, with an eye on her new protégée.

"No. I'll send Jane, if necessary. Go round to this little creature's home and tell them she is ill and that I'll take care of her for to-day, and if they like I'll find a decent place for her. She lives with an uncle and aunt, who beat her. Fancy sending out a child, with nothing on, to sell violets on a day like this!"

"Where do they live?"

"At 24 George Street—in the slums at the back of the station. Their name is Jackson. Come back and tell me. I'll give you some lunch."

Idols

Hugh nodded, stepped back, gave the word to the driver and the cab started off. He trudged along in its wake, amused and touched by the little scene. He could imagine Irene first catching sight of the child, her indignant whipping off of her sealskin, putting the child into the cab, arranging everything off-hand, in her undoubting, imperial fashion. He smiled, too, at her unhesitating anticipation of his immediate acceptance of his mission. It was well that there was a woman like Irene in the world. As he passed by the house, he saw her figure flit quickly across an upper window. He pictured her stirring up the maids, getting a hot bath ready, and kneeling before the fire with a roll of flannel in her hands—the light playing in her fair hair and illuminating her face. He dwelt upon the picture until he had reached his destination.

He found Mrs. Jackson. Her husband was not in. If one judged from his home, he was certainly at that moment hugging the lee-side of a public-house doorway, waiting for opening time. The room was filthy. Mrs. Jackson, if possible, filthier. Her habitual speech, as Hugh shortly discovered, was filthy in the superlative degree. She was also perceptibly drunk. There was an apology for a bed in the room; but in a corner lay some sacking and a bundle of rags, evidently the child's sleeping place. Hugh explained his mission; to his surprise, met with

Idols

instant success. Mrs. Jackson did not see why she should support a child that was nothing to her. She was expecting a sanguinary one of her own shortly. If anyone else cared to support her, they were welcome. For all she cared, they could take her to a much warmer place than Irene's fireside.

"It's all right," he said to Irene, when she came down to the hall to meet him.

"Good," she said. "Come upstairs for a moment."

She turned abruptly and he followed. He knew the signs of Irene's indignation.

Snugly in bed, in the room that former tenants had fitted as a nursery—but unused now for that purpose, to Irene's wistful regret—her one sadness—lay the little girl. Irene went up to her, drew back the bed-clothes and tenderly exposed her shoulders and bosom.

"Look," she said.

He bent over; the flesh was livid with bruises.

"I should like to go among them with a flaming sword," she cried, "and sweep them off the face of the earth."

"I wish you could, before the child they are expecting is born to them," he said, grimly.

He sketched his visit. Irene gave but half heed. His first remark had struck a strongly vibrating chord.

"Let us pray to God that it is never born alive," she said. "To think that such brute-beasts can

Idols

have a child and—oh, why are they allowed to bring them into the world, and given the most glorious privilege of humanity ? ”

“ The next best privilege is to be able to do what you’re doing now,” said Hugh, consolingly.

“ But what is it, after all ? It is like trying to stop an avalanche and just getting hold of a handful of snow.”

“ Well, you’ve got your handful.”

“ Poor little thing,” said Irene.

She tucked the clothes around her, and, after a few nurse-like touches to the arrangements of the room, took Hugh downstairs. Lunch was ready. They sat down together. Gerard was absent on his fishing visit. They imagined him glowering at the weather through Weston’s dining-room windows.

“ What will he say to our little friend upstairs ? ” asked Hugh, helping himself to claret.

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Well, you can’t settle her comfortably for life at a moment’s notice.”

Irene opened her eyes wide.

“ Do you mean that he won’t be pleased to have her here ? My *dear* Hugh ! ”

He smiled inwardly, but prudently changed the topic ; enquired as to her discovery of the child. Why was she herself out in such awful weather ? ”

“ I was taking some trifles to a girl who is ill,”

Idols

she answered. The rest of her explanation agreed with Hugh's conjecture. Driving back, she had seen a woman trying to get the child on its feet. She had stopped the cab and swooped off with her prize.

"But you needn't have risked your own life by taking off your sealskin and coming home in that flimsy thing," he said, with a smile. "Even St. Martin didn't do that."

"Do you know," she replied, with a charming viciousness, and leaning over the table, "I consider St. Martin one of the meanest characters in history!"

Some time after lunch, the servant came into the smoking-room and announced that Mr. Jackson had called.

"He's a very horrid-looking man, ma'am," she remarked.

"I'll go and settle him," said Hugh, rising.

"No. Let me. I shall enjoy it," replied Irene.

And she departed, with the light of battle in her eyes. She met the man in the hall. He began to bluster. Hugh, by a turn of the passage, stood an unobserved spectator.

"You're not going to have the child back," said Irene.

"Then I'll have compensation," said the man.

Idols

"I'm not going to give up my wife's flesh and blood for nothing. 'Tain't likely—we're poor folks and the kid earns a little."

"More shame for you—a great hulking brute like you."

"I don't mind taking five pounds."

"You won't get a half-penny."

"Then out I goes to fetch a policeman."

He moved towards the door. Irene took a step forward.

"You dare threaten me!" she cried. "You! Get out of my house and never let me hear of you again, or, as there's a Lord in heaven, I'll put the Children's Protection Society on your tracks and you'll see the inside of a gaol."

Whether it was the threat or Irene's shining eyes that cowed the man, Hugh could not tell. He slunk away with muffled maledictions and banged the street door after him. Hugh ran to meet her, his heart aglow with her. It was the eternal combat of Mithra and Ahriman. He broke into boyish eulogies. She laughed a little excitedly and wiped her lips with her handkerchief.

"Let us go back to the smoking-room. The foul beast! The whole air tastes of him."

"You have a delicious way of setting the law of England at defiance," he said, laughing.

"Bad laws ought to be defied," she retorted, full

Idols

of the flush of victory. Which exquisitely feminine conviction he had not the heart to disturb.

A little later she claimed his assistance in another matter.

"It's the extension of premises for the Institution," she said. "The plans came in yesterday and I can't make head or tail of them."

She produced the roll of plans from a corner, and spread the sheets on the desk. They bent over them together, and for a long time were deep in architectural discussion.

"It will take such a long time," she said at last. "I wish I could have it all built to-morrow."

"I have no doubt you could, if you really tried," said Hugh. "You can bring most things to pass."

The Institution was Irene's pet philanthropic interest—a charitable organisation of which she was the founder and guiding principle. At first Gerard had scouted the scheme as entirely impracticable; but Irene had succeeded, and, devoting to it her impetuous energy, had lifted those around her to equal enthusiasm. Both Gerard and Hugh were members of the committee, and attended meetings with praiseworthy regularity.

Irene rolled up the plans and replaced them in their corner.

"How little we can do to alleviate the misery in the world!" she said, with a sigh.

Idols

Hugh smiled. "If you could only get a lever long enough and a fulcrum you would move the universe, like Archimedes. But you will have to get to heaven first."

"That's just the appalling part of the idea of heaven," she answered. "As soon as you get there you are useless, utterly and besottedly useless. It's the only terrible aspect of death, that whether there is an hereafter or not, you are cut off forever from doing a hand's turn for your fellow creatures. Everything has to be done in the little sphere of your life—when lever and fulcrum are unattainable. I wonder sometimes that I can be happy. And yet I am—blessedly happy. Can you explain it?"

He replied vaguely, so as to hide betrayal of a little pang; for he knew her thoughts were with Gerard. Association brought his own to Minna for the first time almost since he had caught sight of Irene in the cab. Dismaying comparisons forced themselves on his mind.

"Why are you frowning like that?" she asked, lightly.

"I was thinking of all the happiness you deserve."

She laughed, with a little air of mockery.

"Does it distress you so much?"

"I suppose it does," he said. "Now it is your turn to explain."

But Irene, like a wise woman, dropped the subject.

CHAPTER IV

MINNA HART was an only child. She had lost her mother early in life, and had been left to the casual care of a series of governesses, with none of whom, save one, had she contracted a warmer bond than that of mutual indifference. For this exceptional one she had conceived a girlish passion; but as the young lady had disappeared one night, carrying with her some of her pupil's most valuable jewellery, Minna's love had been turned to hatred, which vented itself afterwards upon all succeeding governesses. As soon as it was practicable she declared her education to be finished, and herself to have done with instructors forever. Whereupon her father, who had as vague a notion of rearing a daughter as of fighting a line-of-battle ship, brought into the house, as duenna, his only sister, an elderly, stout, rubicund, black-haired Jewess of the most orthodox faith. As Minna had never been accustomed to pay regard to Judaic observances, and only went to synagogue now and then, in order to show off her new dresses, her Aunt Leah's interfering piety maddened her past endurance. Moreover, the good lady, in the streets, with blowsy face, red roses,

Idols

gold chain, and a brooch the size of a dessert-plate, was a sight for gods and men, with which Minna shrank from being associated. So when Aunt Leah died suddenly, Minna was inexpressibly relieved. She issued forthwith another domestic manifesto, in which she announced her intention of leading thenceforward a perfectly untrammelled and independent life.

Accordingly, she reigned supreme in her father's house, obeying all her caprices, bending her servants to her will, or summarily dismissing the recalcitrant, surrounding herself with all the bodily luxuries that money can buy—and eating out her young heart in loneliness. Beyond the strong Hebrew sense of parentage, Israel Hart had little sympathy with his daughter. She despised his race and loathed his profession. He felt it instinctively. Her company was an embarrassment. He could not talk of gowns and laces, of music, picture-galleries and light literature. The engrossing pursuit of money-making interested her not in the least. Outside relatives, whose foibles and disagreeablenesses form so harmonious a household bond, there were not. By the wives and daughters of his city co-religionist friends his daughter passed with a sniff of her delicate nose. She would have none of them. Israel shrugged his shoulders, and beyond insisting on her co-operating with him in the interchange of a few formal courtesies—ordeals worse than Sabbath observances under Aunt Leah's dispensa-

Idols

tion—left her entirely to her own devices. In the house, they rarely met, except at dinner. Afterwards, if the humour seized her, she would play to him for half an hour in the drawing-room, and then he would go down to his study. Her comings and goings were of little concern to him. He would have given her a staff of lady companions, had she desired it; but as she refused to be interfered with, Israel, with many wonderings as to the strange and hidden ways of womankind, sagaciously refrained from interference. On one point, however, he stood firm: when the question of her marriage came up for discussion, his voice should have considerable weight. But Minna scoffed at the idea of marriage with such hooked noses and shiny crowns and puffed cheeks as ventured to come a-wooing, and sat instead at her window and sighed, poor child, for the prince that never could come. She lived an aimless, lonely life, wasting her young and splendid womanhood in a vicious circle of unsatisfied longings. The society of her own folk she would not. The alien society that she craved would not her. She was a social leper—the Jew money-lender's daughter. Yet, on looking inward, she knew that the leprosy of her wealth was in her heart's blood. She could not cleanse herself from it, bathe in the Jordan of renunciation, go forth into the world and work out her freedom. She had the Syrian repugnances of Naaman.

Idols

Sometimes the palatial loneliness of her home weighed too awfully upon her spirit. The torture of unsatisfied cravings set all her nerves jangling. Then she would fly from town, without her maid, and visit at Brighton her old Syrian nurse, Anna Cassaba, who gave up to her the best rooms in her house, petted and soothed her, and uttered comfortable prophecies concerning the prince. Perhaps Anna was the only creature in the world she cared for. The old woman worshipped her with an Oriental passion of devotion.

At Brighton, in the intoxication of her liberty and the jainglory of her beauty, the girl sought adventures, played recklessly with fire. She learned the languorous witchery of her voice, and it became a wild pastime to exercise it upon the chance met man. Once a young guardsman fell in with her upon the Parade, carried her off to dinner. At the end, she insisted upon paying half the bill. He demurred. She rose and declared she would walk straight out of the place if he did not accept with good grace. He yielded the point. They went to the theatre together, and then for a long moonlight drive along the coast. It was audacious bliss. She arrived home at two o'clock in the morning. Anna was sleepless with terror, in spite of a warning telegram. Minna explained lightly. The old woman lifted up her young cheeks with tremulous fingers.

Idols

"Oh, God, my child—you have come to no harm?"

Minna broke into merry laughter. Only when the prince came would there be that danger. She would know him in a moment. And she cut the young guardsman dead in the street the next day, having wiped off his kisses forever.

But at last came Hugh.

Oddly enough, she met him first in the Merriams' drawing-room, whither she had gone with her father in anything but an adventurous spirit.

Some shrewd remark of Hugh's had caught Israel's fancy. With the parting handshake he ventured to express the pleasure it would give him to see Mr. Colman at The Lindens. The young man sought for a non-committal phrase of courtesy; but a glance from swimming eyes, half-proud, half-appealing, brought a quick acceptance to his lips. And that was the beginning of things.

That Minna Hart and herself came to be on visiting terms was, of course, Irene's doing. Her revolt at social cruelties had been fired by the scant courtesy paid to the Jew financier's daughter at a large political garden-party, and her impulsive scorn of convention led her to walk the next day to The Lindens and call upon the innocent pariah. It was like many other of Irene's impetuous deeds of knight-errantry. Gerard had expostulated, veiling profound distaste under tones

Idols

of pleasantry. Men who lent money at the God of Jacob alone knew how much per cent. were not welcome in a society belonging virtually, if not actually, to the race of borrowers. It was putting the leopard to lie down with the kid; setting the calf and the lion and the fatling together, without any reasonable hope of millennial advantages. But the dawning dismay in Irene's eyes and the quiver of protest about her lips had checked further expression of cynicism. He had given way, even assumed a magnanimous air of enthusiasm; and with his approbation for lance and his visiting card for buckler, Irene, a modern Britomart, had set forth on her quest. It was on Minna and Israel's return visit that Hugh had first met them.

At the outset Minna had received Irene's offer of friendship with unfeigned gladness. It was the opening to her of that charmed circle of *Gentile* society at whose bounds she had stood so long disconsolate. Indeed, if she had given to Irene a breath of the warmth of her southern nature, Irene would have taken her to her heart, championed her triumphantly through the ordeal of prejudice, and the girl's own beauty would have done the rest. But to Minna she was indefinite discomfort. A recrudescence of Jewish pride gained strength from vague, instinctive feminine jealousies. And then came Hugh. His coming disarranged her universe. Amongst other

Idols

phenomena, it froze up whatever kindly feelings she entertained towards Irene.

This time it was no wilful playing with fire. She flung herself like a mad moth into the flame. She wrote wild letters to old Anna Cassaba. "The prince has come. I knew him at a glance. My heart is full of glowing happiness. I must tell you, to prevent myself crying it aloud. I cannot sleep. Oh, soon I will bring my prince to you." The old woman's eyes grew dim as she read, as only old eyes can, that look backward and inward upon tumultuous passion of long ago. But in her wisdom she burned these letters. It might not be the true prince, after all, she thought.

But Minna doubted not. She had gained her victory; gained it, it is true, at a price—but her ungoverned passion did not pause now to consider it. She saw Hugh nearly every day, sometimes at his chambers, sometimes in quiet meeting-places in the West End, now and then at The Lindens. She was happy. Her daily hour of sweetness gave retrospective and anticipatory joy to the other three and twenty. The elaboration of a distinctive attire for each interview was in itself an absorbing occupation. The undecided aspect of their relations afforded her, also, tremulous amusement.

"It is rather sweet, this pretending, isn't it?" she once remarked to him.

Idols

"What pretending?" he asked, somewhat taken aback.

"This long engagement. As if you are going to make your fortune in two years! It is quite enchanting. And at the end, I suppose orange-blossoms and rice, and all things nice. Eh?"

She raised her eyes to his in lazy mockery—they were walking through the courts of the Temple—and slid her hand through his arm.

"What would you have?" said Hugh.

With a sigh she brought his ear down to her lips, and whispered:

"You—and I'm not going to wait two years for you—but we'll go on pretending a little longer."

"But I am in grim earnest, my Vivien."

"So am I," she replied, with a smile.

After this he realised the impracticability of his scheme. Minna was not one of those sweet future housewives for whom a man works and waits. There was too much "contagion of the blood" in the matter. Yet he swore to himself that there should be no irregular union between them, and that he would not marry her until he had freed himself from her father's clutches. But how to raise the money was beyond his power of scheming. At this stage of embarrassment came the announcement that a son and heir had been born to his uncle. As far as the value of security went, the bond

Idols

in Israel Hart's possession was so much waste-paper.

A post or two brought a comforting letter from his sisters, two maiden ladies many years his senior, who lived a gentle life in a little Hertfordshire townlet. They sympathised with him over this final theft of his inheritance (the good ladies considered it nothing less), but assured him that his Uncle Geoffrey would leave him something when he died. He had hinted as much, some months before, when "apologising to them for his senile folly." It was the very least he could do under the circumstances. Whilst reading this letter Hugh was suddenly startled by an inspired flash. His difficulties melted. He rose from his breakfast and walked about the room, settling the details of the scheme. He would borrow the £5,000 from his sisters on the security of the reversion, such as it was worth, pay off Hart forthwith, reduce the rate of interest he was paying—a natural thing, for his sisters would not accept usurer's interest—devote as much of his yearly income as he could spare to a reserve fund, in the event of the legacy not covering the debt, and marry Minna forthwith. In the event of his own death, he would leave Minna directions to pay his sisters, so that only in this contingency would Israel be virtually repaid out of his own pocket. In any case, his sisters would not be losers. The brilliancy of the pros-

Idols

pect blinded him to at least one fallacy and two unsound premises.

The following afternoon he was at Selwood. His sisters Alicia and Dora, warned by telegram of his coming, met him at the station and walked with him, one on either side, through the town. The broad, quiet street, its breadth oddly exaggerated by the lowness of the straggling rows of old-fashioned houses, terminated at a common, on the further side of which stood the church. Amidst a clump of trees near the rectory glowed the red brick of the house where the two sisters lived. It was a peaceful and gentle spot, and it seemed to harmonise with their faces, which bore no marks of greater stress and strain than those occasioned by their disappointment in a housemaid, and their mild, vague regrets for the fuller, wedded life that had not come to them.

Hugh looked around, drew in great draughts of the sweet air, and then glanced affectionately at his sisters. They walked beside him proudly, holding their heads high. They had gentle but enlarged ideas of the importance of their family, and Hugh, in their eyes, was the incarnation of its distinction. The town was not honoured by such a man every day in the week. They felt the admiring and respectful eyes of Selwood upon them.

"We were just going to write to you when your telegram came," said Dora.

Idols

"We had better wait until we get indoors," said Alicia, reprovingly. As she was five years older than Dora (who herself was ten years older than Hugh), she considered her sister's experience of the world somewhat immature. Hugh laughed, being familiar with Alicia's habits. They were, doubtless, about to ask his advice concerning the finances of the village goose-club, or some such solemn matter which could not be discussed save with closed doors.

It was only after he had allowed them to refresh him with tea in their comfortable drawing-room, that he alluded to the tabooed subject. He lit a cigarette—he could have lit the Queen's Pipe had he so chosen, for they indulged him greatly—and enquired in what way he could serve them. They looked puzzled for a moment. Then Dora's countenance cleared.

"Oh—the letter we were going to write to you! No. It wasn't to ask you for anything. It——"

She looked across at Alicia, who glanced back at her with an air of intelligence and readiness.

"The fact is, dear Hugh," said the elder, "we have rather unfortunate news to give you. Your Uncle Geoffrey is not very well."

Though he expressed his sorrow, he smiled at the anti-climax. The dear, fussy sisters!

"In fact, his heart is seriously affected," continued Alicia, gravely, "and he can't possibly live very long."

Idols

"The deuce he can't," said Hugh, who began to lose sight of the humourous aspect of things. "How do you know?"

"We received a long letter from him this morning, in which he refers to other things besides."

"You had better let me see it," said Hugh.

"Would you get it, Dora?" said Alicia, and then, while the younger sister was fetching the document from a secretaire by the window: "I don't bear malice. I am grieved to hear of Geoffrey Colman's affliction, and I hope he is prepared to meet his end like a Christian and a gentleman, but I consider his conduct towards you has been simply shameful."

Hugh took the letter from Dora's hand and read it through.

"I can get on without his money, my dears," he said, bravely.

"Of course you can," said Alicia, proudly. "A Colman need not be beholden to any man. But that does not condone anything in your uncle's behaviour."

He rose with a laugh, curled his moustache to a fiercer angle, and put his arm round Dora's shoulder, who was standing, and addressed Alicia.

"What does it matter? Don't trouble your dear kind heads about it. I'm sorry for the poor old chap. He was kind to me when a boy—has done more for me than I ever did for him. I came to see how you

Idols

two were getting on, and to comfort my heart with a bottle of grandfather's old Madeira. So let us be happy."

"What a dear, noble fellow you are, to take it like that," said Dora, kissing him.

"My dear child," he replied, with a laugh, "how often am I to tell you that I am not a graven image?"

He did not feel at all noble. On the contrary, very ignominiously disappointed. His iridescent scheme had vanished like a soap-bubble. Geoffrey Colman had intimated, in his letter, with much deprecatory circumlocution, that, on looking lately into his affairs, he found them by no means as prosperous as he had imagined; there were depreciations in lands, unlucky investments, mortgages; in fine, much as he had desired it, he would be able to do nothing at all for Hugh. And then he was practically moribund.

Hugh shrugged off the disappointment. To ask his sisters for a loan out of their comparatively small fortune, upon no security more tangible than the promise of his brotherly efforts to repay them, was absolutely impossible. One comfort remained, for which he thanked the god of chance: the opportune arrival of the letter had effectually precluded his proposal.

He returned to London, where a sudden stress of work awaited him. But the briefs of a criminal advocate, chiefly engaged in small cases, are not

Idols

marked very high. Moreover, ill-luck attended him. After three of his clients were convicted, he made desperate efforts to secure a favourable verdict for a fourth, and his failure roused his exasperation. His book of poems came out just at this time, to be less glowingly received by literary journals than the two previous ones. They complained of tenuity of thought, over-elaboration; advised, finally, a robuster view, a franker acceptance of the emotional facts of life. He threw his press-cuttings angrily into the waste-paper basket. What did the fools know about it? It was the only sphere in which he could divest himself of his accursed emotionality. He turned to Irene. Yet even her tribute fell short of its customary wholeness. She noticed a tendency towards the symbolism of the modern French school in his new volume. She quoted a line, said it suggested Stéphane Mallarmé. Hugh broke out tempestuously.

"Why don't you call me a Decadent at once—an artificer of phrase—an exhausted idealist? That's what your criticism comes to. You feel that I'm on the down grade, and you don't like to tell me."

"Oh, no, Hugh!" she expostulated. "Much of it is as exquisite as ever. But I love all your work to be exquisite. It's only here and there that the meaning is not quite clear and the language appears forced."

She exerted herself to heal his wounded susceptibili-

Idols

ties. But her criticism had sunk deep. It was true. He was on the down grade, in every sphere. Hampered with debt, losing his hold on the sympathies of juries, his poetical vein worked out, he saw exaggerated ruin staring him in the face. He had sowed the wind, was about to reap the inevitable harvest. The high-spirited man, half ashamed of his life, often loses sense of proportion. A *Gewitter*—or concentration of bad weathers—as the Germans appropriately name a storm, had temporarily gathered about him, and he mistook it for the destroying whirlwind. Meanwhile Minna came to his chambers, wove her Morganesque spells about his senses, provoking, seductive, tempting, sympathetic, instinctively bringing him to the brink of the false depths in her nature, cunningly clinking her money-bags in his ear.

One afternoon he met Gerard at the club in St. James's Street, to which both belonged. They were to dine together, later, with some friends. The talk had turned to domestic affairs. Irene, not being able as yet to find a suitable home for her rescued waif, was keeping her in the house; in fact was growing attached to the child.

"That's the devil of it," said Gerard, "when once Irene attaches herself to a thing, nothing can make her let go."

"Why should she?" asked Hugh, shortly.

Gerard lay back in his chair and watched the

Idols

blue wreaths rising from his pipe. Then he said, slowly :

“ There are occasions when it’s awkward. Sometimes I wish Irene were not so strenuous.”

“ Confound it, man ! ” cried Hugh. “ How can you, of all men, disparage her ? ”

Irene’s husband looked at him queerly out of the corner of his eye.

“ Irene didn’t quite step ready-made out of heaven.”

“ It’s a precious good thing she didn’t. Otherwise she would not have looked upon you and me.”

“ You’re a poet, my friend, and I’m a philosopher.”

“ You’re a married man, I suppose you mean, and I am a damned fool. You ought to be separated from Irene for a year or two. Then you would appreciate her.”

“ There is no necessity, I assure you,” retorted Gerard, coolly. “ And as for you’re being a damned fool—well, I have known you too long not to have my own ideas about it. Anyhow, you are growing gunpowdery—not yourself. What’s wrong ? ”

“ My liver’s out of order,” said Hugh.

An acquaintance came up, and they discussed other matters. But it was only afterwards that Hugh recognised how near to a quarrel he had come with his best friend. A less equable temper than Gerard’s might have flared up in resentment at his angry speeches.

Idols

As it was, Gerard seemed to forget the incident, but it aided Hugh to realise his own irritability.

Shortly before Whitsuntide Minna went to Brighton. Her excuse to Hugh was the prospect of a colossal male dinner party, given to half the Hebrew bucket-shop keepers in London. If she remained in town she would have to play Herodias' daughter at this orgie. As the only condition on which she would consent to do this—that she should receive Goldberg's head on a charger—was incapable of fulfilment, she was withdrawing from the scene altogether. But she did not go without Hugh's promise to join her during the Whitsuntide recess.

As soon as the courts rose, he went down. It was lovely weather. Minna looked radiant with youth and happiness. On the evening of his arrival she sat with him on the same seat on the Parade as had witnessed the beginning of her escapade with the young guardsman. She thought thrillingly of the difference between the two experiences. The dusk of the warm evening was closing round them. From the head of the pier came the faint, languorous strains of a waltz. She edged nearer to him, laid her hand on his knee.

"Are you happy that you are here?" The touch and the voice, the perfume of her hair so close to his face, the distant music, the charm of the evening, produced their intoxication.

"Minna!" he whispered.

Idols

"Yes?"

The girl's heart throbbed tumultuously. She had waited weeks and weeks in patience for that note of passion. She hung breathlessly on his lips for their next utterance.

"I give up the waiting. I might strive till Doomsday. I don't care. Anything you wish. Only, soon."

"Yes, very soon," she murmured, with an adorable catch in her voice. "At a registrar's—almost at once."

"I'll give notice to-morrow—Tuesday will be the day."

He had yielded. There was only one Irene in the world. She was beyond his reach. The only other woman he desired lay ready to his arms. And she had money, money, money—the only talisman for happiness in this world. Yet it was a hateful thought.

Even at this moment he cursed the temptation, fiercely fooled himself into the conviction that it did not enter into his plans. He loved her. It was a love match, pure and simple.

"Would you be willing, Minna," he asked, in a low voice, "to let the marriage be a secret, until I can put my affairs in order?"

This bramble seemed to catch his honour on its slippery path down hill. He made the proposal, however, diffidently, lest it might hurt the sensitive sus-

Idols

ceptibilities of race and social station. But she broke into deep, cooing laughter.

"You dear, wise stupid," she said. "That's the very plan I have been dreaming over, night and day, for weeks. And I wouldn't tell you until I felt you would agree. I have worked out every little detail."

"Expound them all to me."

She brushed his ear quickly with her lips.

"On Tuesday," she whispered.

Then she rose quickly from the seat and turned gaily, facing him.

"Let us walk about and be proud of ourselves."

CHAPTER V

As Minna had taken care to have completed the fifteen days' residence required of one of the parties for a marriage by license, it was she who, accompanied by Hugh, gave the necessary notice the next day. On the Tuesday in Whitsun week they were married, taking with them, as one witness, Anna Cassaba, whose Jewish conscience Minna had wheedled into complicity. The old woman, bent and thin, her swarthy face wrinkled with a myriad lines, fastened eyes upon them that still glowed with unquenched fires. Her darling's prince had come. A handsome prince, indeed, for which she pardoned him his Gentile birth. But it took all her love for Minna to reconcile her to the non-religious ceremony. Its bareness shocked her.

The Registrar was an old man in a skull cap, with long, white beard and lack-lustre eyes. He took but indifferent interest in the pair. A wearied resignation showed itself in his manner, as he administered the customary declarations, and pointed with shrivelled finger to the spaces wherein they should sign their names. He reminded one of an old scholar serving out trumpery fiction to the subscribers of a circulating

Idols

library. A sorry book he was delivering up to them. A trivial pair were they for desiring it. He wished them good luck in a mechanical, far off tone. If they had put the fees in the slot of an automatic machine and drawn out a marriage certificate, the business could not have been more impersonally concluded.

Out in the street again they parted from the old woman, who stood for some time watching them as they went in the direction of the new lodgings that Hugh had engaged on the Parade. She would dearly have loved to shelter them like love-birds in her own nest. But prudence forbade Minna to reveal her secret to Anna's servants. She sighed as soon as they had disappeared, and turning her slow steps homewards, thought in her old woman's way of the beautiful children that would be.

The newly wedded pair walked on for a long while in silence. Minna pressed her husband's arm tightly, waiting for him to speak, half afraid of breaking in upon his thoughts, which she instinctively felt must be deeper than her own. Besides, the bareness of the ceremony had left her with a vague depression. It was a cold, grim episode in the heart of her romance. The walk grew hateful. She longed for the shelter of four walls and the dearer, warming shelter of his arms. Until they were about her, life was a limbo where nothing was defined. She glanced up at him timidly, to see him looking straight before him, his shoulders

Idols

square, his head thrown back defiantly. Now that she had won him, she faltered over her victory. A sudden dismay depressed her further. His present attitude was an impenetrable wall closing round the inner man. What did she know of him? For a sickening moment her brain was confused by the illusion that he was a total stranger whom some nightmare freak had made master of her destiny. It vanished quickly, but an after-sensation of fear remained. It was so different from the joyous glow that she had anticipated. She felt herself upon the verge of tears. Resentment against him, as if to justify her depression, began to spread like a dull pain around her heart. It was cruel of him to walk as he was doing, in other spheres, apart from her whom he had just made his wife. She withdrew her hand from his arm. He started, caught her hand and replaced it, pressed it closely to him and looked down upon the trouble of her face.

"Poor child," he said, "you are shaken. Thank goodness it is over."

The tears began to gather in her eyes. "It was horrid," she said.

"Well, it will never happen again, sweetheart. Let us forget the dismal old man and think of what lies before us. You must be bright and happy on your wedding day."

"If you would let me," said Minna.

Idols

"I, dearest?" he exclaimed, with some prickings of self-reproach.

"Yes. Why have you walked all this time without speaking a word to me?"

A tear fell. It roused the man's tenderness, melted the cold weight of misgiving that had held him silent. He felt that he had behaved brutally to her. She was his wife; nothing could alter it. Cruelly vain now were searchings of heart and conscience. He had caused her unhappiness already. In the revulsion of feeling he broke into passionate speech, bending as he walked, to whisper in her ear. He spoke foolish, words of comfort, chided her loverwise for vain fancies, explained his previous mood of seriousness. It was a solemn step they had taken. He was trying to realise that he held her happiness in his hands for the rest of her life. Minna began to brighten.

"It is foolish to cry," she said, "but I was hungering for a word."

He laughed gaily, to cheer her. She must laugh, too, like a happy bride, to please her lord. He demanded to see the wedding ring. She held up her gloveless left hand. Her heart grew warm again, as the symbol of their union gleamed before the eyes of both. A little later, she was nestling in his arms, murmuring her content in low dove notes that stole sweetly over his senses.

Thus began their married life. In moments of

Idols

intoxication they touched some of the lower stars. In sober hours they trod upon indubitable earth, which each pretended to call the floor of paradise. When the Trinity law sittings commenced, Hugh was forced to return to London. On the evening before his departure, they were sitting together on the pier, somewhat silent. Minna sighed her regret. The end of the honeymoon already. Although it was not the poor tragedy:—"Dejà!—Enfin!"—yet Hugh's responsive, "Yes, already," was somewhat lacking in spontaneity. Minna marked it, with a little pang of mortification, but she said, indulgently:

"I believe you want to get back to your horrid briefs."

He did not deny the fact. "I must lose no chances now, dear. Energy is doubly necessary."

"There ought to be no work in the world," she answered, in her slow, plaintive way. "I wish we could live just as we have been doing."

Hugh protested. His blindest flatterer could not call him a fanatical Carlylean in his views of the nobility of toil, but purposeful joining in the great struggle for existence was a condition of moral health. He apologised for the platitude. Minna laughed, dubbed it an old wives' fable to be ranked with the proverbial but fallacious advantages of early rising. She wanted nothing in life but love. It was its own purpose. It was the heart of life.

Idols

"But the heart cannot exist by itself," he answered, earnestly. "It must have its clothing of flesh, its supply of blood. And the stronger and more vigorous these outer walls of life are, the truer does it beat."

"I think you only look upon love as one of the outer graces of life and not the heart at all," she said, pensively. "For you, the heart is something quite different."

"If it isn't you, dear, can you tell me what it is?" he asked, tenderly.

She yielded herself to the arm he had slipped behind her.

"I suppose it is I, after all," she said, with a half sigh. "I hope so. If not I shall be throbbing, quite bare, without my wall of flesh. You will always go on loving me, Hugh? It would kill me now if you didn't."

He answered as millions of men have done since the world began: honestly, according to his lights, willing to love her loyally for her soul's sake, not for her beauty's. Yet the consciousness of an effort of volition in the matter was disquieting. As usual, he took refuge in impetuous speech.

"I shall love you blindly and passionately till the hour of my death."

The first morning in London he missed her. His bachelor rooms seemed cold and informal with vague

Idols

discomfort. His breakfast, served by the porter's wife, who attended to his domestic needs, was singularly unappetising. The morning paper supported in front of him by the tea-pot proved an inadequate substitute for Minna's pretty face and sweet, lazy talk. He convinced himself that he loved her truly. But when he reached his chambers he found a brief awaiting him that demanded all his faculties. In half an hour he had forgotten her. When he went out for lunch, it was with a glow of satisfaction at work accomplished. At the restaurant, he met brother barristers, fellow-frequenters of the place, and found unprecedented zest in the keen, masculine talk. In the afternoon at his club, he dropped into a vacant arm-chair by the side of the editor of a great review, who cast over all who approached him the charm of his culture and the spell of his genius. By the afternoon post came two letters, one from Minna, who had addressed him at the club according to arrangement, the other from Irene. He opened his wife's first, read it with genuine tenderness. Everything, she wrote, was plunged into utter darkness. She was yearning for to-morrow when she would see her dear love again. A passionate letter with an untrained girl's lack of reserve. He went to a writing-table, finished a half-written letter of his own and dropped it into the club letter-box. Then he read Irene's communication. It was a request that he would attend a committee

Idols

meeting of her Institution at half-past eight. Gerard was engaged and could not come. She reproached him for his absence, was anxious for a talk with him, had addressed him at the club on the chance of catching him.

Long custom had caused him to regard such requests as commands. To please her he would have broken many engagements. At half-past eight he found himself in the committee room, and seated at the table by the side of Irene who had reserved a place for him. The business concluded, they went back to Sunnington together by the District Railway.

"What have you been doing with yourself all this time?" she said, as soon as they were settled comfortably in the train.

"Oh, lotus-eating, generally," he replied.

"I thought so."

"Why?"

"It is said to impair the memory. You seem to have forgotten all about us."

"I accept the rebuke," he answered, meekly.

"Now tell me all that I have been oblivious of."

She gave him her little budget of news, aware that he would give no further information as to his own doings. She spoke of the waif she had rescued.

"You have no idea how strong and bonny she looks. I have been canvassing for votes for the St. Katherine schools. The election is next week. I think she'll get in."

Idols

"But I had an idea you were going to keep her," said Hugh.

"So had I. I shall miss her dreadfully. It would be so nice to adopt a child. But Gerard thought this would be better for her—and he's so wise, you know."

The idea of her husband's goodness and wisdom brought tenderness into her eyes, changing her expression to one of wonderful simplicity. Hugh made no reply, but leaned back and watched her across the compartment which they alone occupied. The central light, that fell full upon her, showed nothing, in her face, of the practical, capable woman of affairs; only the soft charm of girlhood, that lingered still in her eight and twenty years. Presently she bent forward.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she asked, smiling.

"I was dipping into the poem of your face, and reading my favourite bits," he replied, half seriously.

"What are they?"

"Oh, I am not going to talk Shakespearian comedy to you," he answered, laughing. "So you needn't expect it."

The jest put her into a mood of light frivolity. They discussed faces. Some were sermons, some were Hymns, Ancient and Modern, some were comic operas, some were post-office directories, whilst others were the collected works of minor poets. She won-

Idols

dered what her own was. Hugh suggested an ode. The comparison pleased her and she thanked him prettily. Really, she had been a most ugly child. Just as if she had been at a feast of features and stolen the scraps. The foolish chat took them to Sunnington. He walked with her as far as the gate of her house.

"When are you coming to dinner?"

"The day after to-morrow," he said, after a moment's reflection.

He shook hands with her and turned homeward with a buoyant step. He felt happy, exhilarated, a different man from the bereaved and depressed bridegroom who had set out in the morning. The day had opened with a wretched sense of loss; it closed with a glad consciousness of gain. He wondered at the change. The fact was that the small but varied incidents of the day, bringing him into close touch with the external world of work, action, thought and sympathy, had stimulated a somewhat flagging moral energy. He was conscious of this as he dwelt upon them. Yes, these were the things that made life worth the living. These together formed the heart of life. Without them he would perish of inanition. Love, even sweet, wedded love a fortnight old, was but the fringe, the grace, the colour, the what you will of adornment of life; but its heart—ah, no! He was honest and dishonest with himself at once. The conviction that he had spent his first day of absence

Idols

from his wife, in whole-hearted enjoyment of the outer world, was too absolute for him to accept it otherwise than frankly. But deep down in his soul were warning glimmerings of a truth to which he defiantly blinded his eyes—glimmerings that duskly revealed a love that might be the heart of life, rich, throbbing, vitalising, such as his feelings for Minna were not.

He drew her letter from his pocket and read it through again. His heart smote him sorely for not feeling more miserable. Instinctively he conjured up the hours of sweet intoxication and caught at their lingering glamour.

“Poor little girl,” he said aloud, rising to his feet. “How wretched she must be at this moment.”

He sat down at his writing-table.

“Sweet little wife,” he began, “I would that you were with me now.” And, for the hour, he was quite sincere.

CHAPTER VI

"I HAVE something serious to say to you, my daughter."

The speaker was Israel Hart. The place, his study, a commodious apartment overlooking the front drive, of which the most striking features were a great library table and a solid iron safe. The time was a mid-autumn Sunday afternoon. A cheerful fire showed up the warmth of a Turkey carpet, and cast flickering gleams upon the varnished surfaces of the three oil pictures on the walls. The money-lender was sitting at the table, with some correspondence in front of him, when he greeted Minna, who had come in obedience to a summons, with this announcement. He was a man of over sixty, stout and loose-featured, with grizzling hair and beard. His race was clearly written on his countenance, which bore, too, that stamp of his calling which can best be suggested negatively as an absence of spirituality. The absorbing pursuit of money hardens the eyes and leaves the lower part of the face undetermined. One meets a thousand such, morning and evening, in suburban trains. Yet the face of Israel Hart was not without marks of integrity and even of a certain benevolence.

Idols

Minna crossed the room slowly to the fireplace and rested one small shoe on the fender.

"Yes, papa?"

"I have here a formal letter from my good friend, Simeon Goldberg, which I wish you to read."

"About marrying me?"

"Yes. It deals exclusively with the subject."

"What is the use of my reading the letter?" she said, without shifting her attitude, and ignoring the letter which her father had wheeled round in his chair in order to offer her. "I can guess what's in it. Oh, dear! Why does he worry?"

"I desire you to read it, Minna," said her father.

She moved, took it from him, read it nonchalantly, with a contemptuous smile, and threw it, with a woman's charming awkwardness in throwing, upon the table.

"I might be shares in a new company he was asking you for. Do I look like a scrip or a bond? I won't have him, of course, but when you write to him, tell him that that's not the way to win a woman with blood in her veins."

"You're a foolish girl, Minna. If you have any kind of regard for my wishes you will give this matter further consideration. Where will you, Minna Hart, find a better match?"

"Oh, in a penny box!" she cried, flippantly. "At least it would have some latent fire at the end of it!"

Idols

"You will regret it," said her father.

"It will be something to do, then. Tell him I'll try. It may soothe his vanity."

"Come here, my daughter," said the old man.

She moved obediently to his side and put her hand in his that was held open.

"You and I have managed to drift quite apart, but I am your father and must think for you. What are you going to do, when I am gone, if you don't get some good man to take care of you?"

She looked at him rather pityingly. It was such a futile question. Her undeveloped sympathies saw only its ludicrous, not its pathetic side.

"Oh, I shall marry some day," she said, lightly. "You need have no fear of that."

"Ay. But whom?"

She shrugged her shoulders and tapped her toe on the carpet with a shade of irritation. It was ridiculous to stand there like a tableau vivant, holding her father's hand.

"Think of Simeon Goldberg, a good friend, a man not so careless in observance of the Law as we—but still of the Reformed faith—and worth"—his voice grew unconsciously reverential—"five hundred thousand pounds, if he's worth a penny."

The girl's eyes flashed for a second, then grew again contemptuous.

"It's an absolute impossibility. You must let this

Idols

drop, papa. We don't live in the Middle Ages when you could put me on bread and water and lock me up until I consented; or in patriarchal times, when you could curse me for disobeying you—so why discuss the matter further? I shall marry in my own good time. I am not the sort that old maids are made of."

He released her hand and turned towards the table.

"Very well," he said, taking up a pen, "I will not force you. But remember that your choice among our people is limited."

"I might choose outside them," she said, pausing in her lazy walk towards the door.

Israel Hart started round in the chair and bent his brows upon her. She tried saucily to meet his eyes, but hers sank abashed.

"My daughter," he said, sternly. "Let me never hear you say such a thing again, even in jest. Remember you are a Jewess."

She stood for a moment or two twitching her fingers, longing to retort. But she did not dare. It was only when she found herself outside his door that she gave vent to the passionate outburst:

"Would to God the accursed race had perished with the other ten tribes!"

She went upstairs to her bedroom with anger and foreboding at her heart, and put on hat and jacket, casting mere mechanical glances at the mirror, for the sake of adjustment. Six months before, her dressing

Idols

to meet Hugh had been a matter of sweet and important coquetry. She looked, however, very pretty in her dark-blue costume, with dainty ruffle at her throat, when she met him three-quarters of an hour later in Kensington Gardens. He was walking moodily up and down the broad walk, near their appointed meeting place; but when he caught sight of her he quickened his step.

"I am sorry I'm late," she said, with some petulance; "but when you will make me take these long journeys——"

"It is not my fault, dear," he said, casually. "I told you I was lunching at Lancaster Gate and was going to put in a call near by before dinner. It was my only hour."

"Oh, well, never mind. I'm here now. It was papa who kept me. I've been discussing matrimony with him."

"In the abstract, or——"

"Both. It began with the all too concrete Goldberg. Refusing him, I'm to marry an abstract Jew or the curse of Abraham will fall upon me."

"Be more precise, if you don't mind," he said, seriously.

She gave him a detailed account of the conversation, picturesquely satiric. Hugh listened sombrely, holding his stick with both hands behind his back, as they strolled slowly down among the fallen leaves.

Idols

"So he'll never consent," she concluded. "I suppose we'll have to wait until—well—the ordinary way of nature. He's an old man."

"We mustn't think of that, my child," said Hugh, with some gentleness.

"I don't see why not. It will solve all our difficulties."

"What a mixture of flint and flesh you are, Minna," he said, regarding her curiously.

"I never pretend to love where I don't," she replied. "And when people thwart me I begin to dislike."

They walked on a little in silence, turned and retraced their steps. The dusk began to gather round them and the autumn mist to hang upon the thinning branches. Minna shivered a little and took his arm.

"Why don't you say something kind to me, Hugh dear?" she said, plaintively.

He stooped and kissed her, and they went on their way less far apart than before. Presently she asked him where he was going to dine.

"At the Merriams."

"I wish to goodness you wouldn't!" she exclaimed, petulantly.

"My dear girl, because I am secretly married to you, I am not going to give up my dearest and oldest friends."

"I hate them. You know I do."

Idols

"It's a pity, my dear, but it can't be helped. And haven't we discussed this rather too often lately?"

"You do very little to please me," she said.

"I would do anything in reason."

"If you loved me, you would not think of reason."

"Look here, Minna," said Hugh, losing patience, "what do you want? Of course I love you. But as things are, I must lead my own life. If you were always with me, there would be modifications—naturally. I am getting as tired of this half and half state as you are. I was going soon to approach your father on the subject. But what you have told me this afternoon has somewhat disturbed my plans. We must wait a little longer. But in the meantime——"

"I don't mind waiting at all," she interrupted. "It isn't that."

"Well, what is it, dear, that I can do for you?"

"I see so little of you—and you don't seem to care. If you go on like this, I feel I shall grow to dislike you—and you are my husband—and oh, darling, I want you so sometimes!"

All the seductive richness in her voice toned the last appeal. Hugh's conscience pricked him. He had of late felt himself drifting far from her and had made no efforts to reapproach. Now, however, the pathetic and languorous appeal caused him to bend his head very tenderly.

"Tell me what to do, sweetheart."

Idols

"Ah! you know," she murmured.

"The window?"

She pressed his arm tightly. "I shall go to sleep so happy."

So he promised and the girl's face brightened. Soon afterwards they parted. Minna drove homewards in a cab, kissing her hand to him as it moved off, and Hugh walked along towards Lancaster Gate, deep in troubled thought. It was an ill-starred marriage. Already he regretted his folly and his weakness. If they had shared the same home, living a common life, he felt that he could have maintained a constantly tender attitude towards her, by means of a passive acceptance of his lot. But in the present circumstances, the nature of things demanded of him active demonstration. The necessary intriguing was repugnant to him. To visit his wife like a thief in the night was an act from which he shrank as from something mean and degrading. A passionate love would have swept away pettier feelings. It is only such a love that laughs at locksmiths; a waning passion bestows on them irritable curses. The prospect of entering The Lindens, late at night, by a window which Minna secretly unlatched, and creeping thief-wise up the stairs to her apartments, had lost its edge of romance. He had promised, however, and it became a disagreeable duty.

It damped his spirits for the evening. Even Irene

Idols

could not cheer him. Conversation degenerated into futile bar gossip between Gerard and himself, which they protracted sleepily till a late hour. When at last he found himself with Minna, who had taken infinite pains to make her beauty as attractive as possible, she reopened, with feminine inconsistency, the chapter of the Merriams and sent him away, after a little, angry and disheartened.

His unqualified refusal to allow his regard for her to affect his relations with his friends gradually magnified itself, through the girl's jealousy, into a great wrong. Once at the turn of a road she met him with them face to face. The after-glow of laughter was in Irene's eyes. Minna acknowledged their salute with sullen stiffness, and when Hugh fell back a pace and turned to her with outstretched hand, she dismissed him angrily. Her face wore the hardened expression he had seen on it once before. Then he had attributed it to strength. But now it seemed to reveal only sulky ill-breeding. A phrase defining her flashed through his mind. She looked common.

"What a peculiarly disagreeable young woman," said Gerard, as he rejoined his friends.

Hugh winced. Although not ill pleased to see that Gerard had no suspicions of the relations between himself and Minna, the outspoken judgment on his wife was anything but gratifying.

He struggled, however, to atone by gentleness for

Idols

his grievous fault in marrying her. But it was a futile task to try to convince a jealous, untrained girl, who reasoned from her appetites and argued from her passions. At last he gave it up with a helpless gesture of impatience.

“It seems beyond your nature to comprehend the bond between the Merriams and myself,” he said, one day.

She laughed scornfully. “It would appeal to the meanest understanding. ‘A man and his wife and the Tertium Quid.’”

It was the first time she had made such an insinuation. A second passed before he could quite realise the scope of her words. Then the anger blazed in his eyes and the girl shrank back frightened.

“If you ever say such a silly and wicked thing again,” he said, “I will not speak to you again as long as I live.”

He left her there and then, in the middle of the road, and returned homewards with angry strides. The first available post brought him a repentant letter. A semblance of harmony was re-established. Thenceforward Minna kept silence concerning Irene, but she none the less harboured a bitter resentment against her husband. The habit of brooding over grievances grew into a disastrous occupation. They rarely spent a non-recriminative hour. The issue of dispute, no longer Irene, became in turns his work, his social

Idols

engagements, his neglect, his aloofness, even his Gentile birth and inherited instincts.

And so the dreary months wore on. At last certain horrible fears that had been vaguely haunting the girl's ignorance developed into certainties. The prospect of maternity was inexpressibly repugnant to her idle, sensuous nature. The thought became a nightmare. So bitterly did she resent Hugh's attitude towards her, that she shrank from telling him. At last she made up her mind, wrote to him asking for an interview at his chambers. He replied that he would be engaged in court at the time she mentioned, and regretted that he could not see her until the next day. Quite an affectionate and courteous letter from a busy and unsuspecting man. But it sent her into an unreasoning passion of anger. She tore the letter into tiny fragments, ordered her boxes to be packed and went off forthwith to Brighton.

It was only a fortnight afterwards that Hugh received a letter from Anna Cassaba telling of an accident, illness and a premature end of troubles. In consternation he took the first train down. Minna refused to see him. Old Anna was in great distress. Hugh's handsome face and proud bearing had won her heart. To act the stern janitress taxed all her love for her darling. She sought to alleviate his disappointment, suggested that women often had strange, unaccountable fancies and aversions. Better to leave

Idols

the poor child alone for the present. When she recovered she would be her own gay self again—forget the irrational dislike she had conceived for him, love him with all her old love and there would yet be a bonny babe of theirs for old Anna to dandle on her knees before she died.

The man's pity and tenderness were wonderfully quickened. If she had willed, he would have folded her in his arms and made her sick bed sweet. He scribbled a hasty line.

“Darling—I am grieved to the heart. Your husband loves you, dear, with a fresher love. Let me tell you so—and tell you to get well, when all things will be different and dear again.”

The old woman took the note to Minna. He crept up to the bedroom door, listened, heard the faint rustle of the paper in her hands, and then came her voice, irritable and peevish:

“Tell him to go away and let me be.”

So Hugh returned to London heavy-hearted, with a gnawing sense of having ruined the girl's life. The weeks went past. Early in the New Year Minna returned to her father's house, looking ill and worn. Israel noticed the change, grew solicitous as to her well-being. Why had she not told him she had been poorly at Brighton? He would have given her all the care and nursing that money could provide. His kind words caused her a faint stirring of emotion—an

Idols

adumbration of a tenderness that might have been; and as the loneliness and aimlessness of her life grew more oppressive, an instinct of self-preservation drew her nearer to his side. The horror of her illness still clung to her. It was a kind of Maccabre dance over her dead passion. Yet she was conscious of wrong done to Hugh, and received him kindly when he came to see her one afternoon shortly after her return. He was anxious to make reparation.

"We are bound together for the rest of our lives, dear," he said. "Perhaps it was a mistake to begin with—and certainly the secrecy has been a terrible blunder. Let us brave it all out now and be done with it, and start life afresh."

"Do you think we can ever be happy again together?"

"My dear little girl, I have wronged you—but I will try to make amends. I have a certain position in society—even if you don't love me, your life will be brighter than it is now."

She leaned back in one of her indolent attitudes.

"Perhaps. Not now. I am afraid of my father. He might curse me—and that would be annoying."

Hugh paused, somewhat baffled at this new idea.

"They will be merely words of anger," he replied.

"It will not be long lived."

But she shook her head. It was better to wait. Perhaps she might gradually influence him—and then

Idols

all would be smooth sailing. Hugh saw an element of reason in her proposal, and for a time returned to his briefs. For his own sake, he was not loth to postpone the announcement. The debt to Israel weighed heavily upon his conscience. But as long as his marriage remained a secret, and as long as his uncle lived, he could spare himself the galling reproach of trickery. Meanwhile his practice was showing signs of improvement. A brilliant case might land him at a bound into affluence, and then he could raise the money, cry quits with the urbane and gentle mannered Shylock on the score of his ducats, and brave his reproaches on the score of his daughter. Thus doth hope spring eternal in the human breast.

But unforeseen action on the part of old Anna Cas-saba suddenly hastened events. She let her house in Brighton for an indefinite period, and announced her return to Smyrna. A lawsuit had arisen over some property which Minna's Syrian mother had bequeathed to the old nurse, and which formed the chief source of her comfortable income. Anna was summoned to look after her interests. The nostalgia of her native East, which she had not visited for over twenty years, grew strong upon her. She could not tell how long she might be absent from England.

Minna contemplated her departure with sinking heart. Anna was the saving spar to which she clung. Sheltering her, temporarily, in her own dressing-room

Idols

at The Lindens, Minna wept in her arms and implored a speedy return. The old nurse cried, too, and spoke of death, as old folks will, and comforted her in such wise that at last the girl grew desperate in her anticipated desolation. The result was a sudden determination that Hugh should speak.

"I have come to the end of my tether," she said to him. "Anything would be better than this. I'll get papa to ask you to dinner. He likes you, and has been enquiring why you come so seldom now."

In the course of a day or two he received and accepted an invitation for the following Monday. He felt happier. The die was cast. If Hart called him a scamp for thus tricking him out of five thousand pounds, he would bear it as an atoning humiliation for Minna's sake. He prepared to go through the ordeal with an air of disdain. But in his category of scorn he himself was included.

CHAPTER VII

"He saved Gerard's life? What nonsense! If he had, I should have heard about it."

Irene spoke warmly. The person she addressed was Harroway, an elderly solicitor, an intimate friend of Hugh and the Merriams. His wife Selina, who had brought him to pay an afternoon call on Irene, watched with amused serenity the discomfiture on his broad and benevolent face.

"It isn't nonsense," he protested. "I'm not in the habit of talking nonsense, I assure you. Am I, Selina?"

"A wife's testimony isn't evidence," replied Mrs. Harroway.

"But what do you mean?" asked Irene, growing serious.

"Literally what I said. Have you never heard?"

"No."

"It was in Switzerland, years ago. Chevasse, who was on the trip with them, told me. The two were roped together, suddenly fell and dangled over a precipice, Colman lowest. The guide on top couldn't hold them up. The rope was slipping. So Colman whipped out his knife and cut himself off."

Idols

"And then?"

"Oh, then the guide hauled Gerard up safe and sound."

"But Hugh?"

"When they looked over to identify the spot where his pulp was lying, they saw him half way down, miraculously caught on a jag of rock. You might try the game twenty million times without it succeeding. I've had the place pointed out to me. And there he remained some hours clinging on between heaven and earth."

Irene closed her eyes with a shiver.

"Don't," she said. "You make me sick."

"Funny that Gerard never told you of it, for a clearer case of saving life at the obvious sacrifice of one's own, I have never heard of."

Irene's hand trembled a little as she poured out the tea. Mrs. Harroway, unobserved, shook her head reproachfully at her husband, who, interpreting her action rightly, plunged into irrelevant observations. But at that moment Gerard entered the room. Irene turned to him at once impulsively.

"Oh, Gerard, Mr. Harroway has been telling me a horrible story of Hugh saving your life in Switzerland. Is it true?"

A shade of annoyance passed over his face.

"Yes," he replied. "I remember his doing something of the kind."

Idols

"Oh, do let us talk of something cheerful," said Mrs. Harroway; and she led the conversation to ordinary topics until the end of the visit.

When the Harroways had gone, Irene sat on the arm of Gerard's chair.

"Why did you never tell me?"

He grew red, fidgeted awhile with his hands. At last, looking up, and seeing her luminous eyes fixed upon him, he said, gravely:

"There are certain things that a man keeps in his own heart."

The solemnity of the saying somewhat awed her.

"And Hugh never spoke either."

"Of course not," said Gerard.

"What an unpayable debt we owe him."

"We'll pay it all right when the time comes."

"What little things women are when compared with men," said Irene. "We could never have kept a fact like that locked up in our souls."

Gerard accepted the tribute with his usual reserve. As his wife knew, he was not a man to waste words over sentiment. She uttered what she felt were his thoughts.

"I didn't understand your not telling me. But now I do. Those things, when unspoken of, knit two men more firmly together."

She was silent for a moment; then changing her tone and grasping Gerard's arm:

Idols

"We won't speak of it again, either," she said. "It is horrible to think of. And what should I have done without you?"

The servant entering to remove the tea things was a signal for Irene to dress for dinner. She left the room, and then Gerard rose, and, walking to the window, took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

The result of her knowledge of this fact in the lives of Hugh and Gerard was an added tenderness of gratitude in her feelings towards the former. During the past few months he had been slipping somewhat apart from her. He had lost his old buoyancy of manner, and it was easy for her feminine intuition to perceive that the change had some radical cause. Now she blamed herself for not having taken the initiative, and offered him more openly the aid of her friendship. The chance of doing so occurred on the following Sunday, when, in response to an urgent little note, Hugh came to lunch. Gerard was absent. Business had summoned him to Edinburgh, where he was likely to remain some time. The two sat down to table alone together, and, while the servant was in the room, talked of divers matters: the waif who had been admitted into St. Katherine's school, the Institution which was flourishing, and extending its sphere of benevolence. At last she touched upon literary matters.

Idols

"When are we to see a new volume?"

He lifted his shoulders slightly, and fingered the stem of his old German wine glass.

"When I have regained my lost youth," he said, ironically. "One must have enthusiasm even for that kind of rubbish. Don't look so concerned," he added, with a laugh; "I'm not hypochondriac yet. My view of life is only growing a little more materialistic, that is all. I share Peter Bell's conception of the primrose."

He quoted the lines jestingly, and, the meal being over, drew out his cigarette case and began to smoke.

"You are talking for the sake of talking," said Irene. "I wish you wouldn't. Hugh," she continued, with a certain shy softness that had its charm, "don't be vexed with me. Tell me what is changing you. You know that I owe to you the existence of all that is dearest to me in the world, and I long so to pay you back a little in the help that friendship can give."

"You can't do it now, Renie," he said, abruptly. "Afterwards you may. That is, if you and Gerard don't think me a pitiful scamp. You won't have long to wait."

The sudden realisation that this was perhaps the last of the brotherly meals he should have with her, dismayed him. In a few days he would be either the acknowledged betrothed or the acknowledged husband

Idols

of another woman—her bitterest enemy. The old dear order had changed. Hitherto he had held a unique and delicate position in her thoughts, that of the loyal friend and honourable lover. Henceforward he would be another woman's husband, which would make an immeasurable difference. He looked round the familiar walls of the cosy dining-room, and then with unconscious wistfulness upon her face in profile. To him there was none more beautiful in all the world. The broad forehead; the delicate, sensitive nose; the strong, pointed chin; the mobile, faintly coloured lips; the eyes capable of great passion, yet showing habitually a grave and luminous kindness; the noble up sweep of her hair from the temple contours, giving an impression of queenliness; the soft, fair gold of her hair itself, crowning her head too lightly to be a crown and too individually to be a halo; the head poised with tender dignity upon a broad, full throat—all the conflicting features combined harmoniously together to form in a lover's eyes a face telling of a great and tender womanhood. And the picture of that other rose before him, beautiful, too, in its sensuous duskiness, yet stamped forever with his own condemnation of commonness. His glance grew troubled as it met Irene's.

"There is nothing in the wide world that we would not do for you, Hugh," she said.

"Doing is one thing," he replied. "Letting

Idols

things go on is another. I'm afraid you'll come to look upon me as a blackguard, and that must make some difference."

"Nothing will make any difference in our love for you. So long as Gerard and I sit opposite here, there will be your place always between us. Besides, the idea of your being a blackguard is simply silly!"

He laughed in spite of his depression. Her tone was emphatic.

"I believe you'd champion me through a grand jury list of iniquities. I wish you could have split yourself into two in the years past, Renie. You would have kept me out of mischief."

It was Irene's turn to look troubled.

"Do you know, Hugh," she said in a low voice, "that lately I have feared I may have spoiled your life."

"Ah, my dear child," he cried, regaining in a flash all his old vehemence, "it is not the missing of the angel's touch that spoils a man's life. He is singularly fortunate to come within the beat of her wings."

"Thank you," she said, blushing very prettily. "That is like your old, extravagant self."

For a long time afterwards the colour remained in her face. Thousands of women have been called angels, and have thought little of it. But not one has felt otherwise than tremulously abashed when the similitude has come from a man's worshipping sincerity.

Idols

But that was the end of the conversation. Irene had said her say, and no more was to be gained by dwelling on the topic.

When he had gone, she settled down to her correspondence. But for a long while she sat biting the end of her quill pen.

"I wonder who she can be," she said, musingly. Of course it was a woman. She passed in review all their common acquaintance; then shook her head with a smile. This disturbing element in Hugh's life lay outside the circle. The image of Minna Hart never presented itself before her thoughts. For Irene had large ideas, and pictured the woman as one of commanding intelligence and brilliant personality. How else to account for the folly of so vigorous a manhood as Hugh's? A noble man, a noble choice. Foolish—but sublimely so. She knew little of the ways of men, judged them according to her own ideals. For her life had been spent singularly apart from men. Her mother, a delicate woman, unable to bear the Indian climate, had brought her up in quiet seclusion. She had been a choice spirit, a weaver of dreams, one whose presence is felt like the moonlight through Gothic tracery, a writer of flower-like fairy tales for children, an ethereal being whom it was Irene's impassioned mission to shelter from the rough winds. Her father, once a soldier with a V. C. in the Mutiny, afterwards a commissioner of a great Indian province,

Idols

had appeared to her in brief spells of leave, invested with a halo of glory. On her mother's death, she had gone out heartbroken to join him, but only to learn, on arrival at Bombay, that she was fatherless. And then, for the first time, men, Gerard and Hugh, had come into her life—and she saw them as gods walking. The years had mellowed into a strong, homogeneous character her inherited qualities—the mother's delicate womanliness, the father's daring and power of leadership—and busy contact with the world had developed the acuteness of her judgment; but the ideals of the girl survived, unprofaned by vulgar touch. The two men to whom she had given her love and friendship still remained as gods, above the baser passions and meaner follies of mankind.

Suddenly a face flashed before her, as that, possibly, of the mysterious woman who was involved in Hugh's life. She had never seen it in the flesh; only a photograph of it some years ago, in Hugh's rooms, when she was lunching there with Gerard. She had taken a book from the shelves and the portrait had fallen out. It represented a woman, tall, resplendent, haughty, cruelly beautiful. The eyes, even in the photograph, glittered coldly and dangerously. Irene had uttered a little cry of surprise and admiration. Hugh had taken it from her hands.

"A great beauty," she had remarked.

"Yes. *La Belle Dame sans merci.*"

Idols

“ Her eyes are cruel.”

“ They are ophidian. I don't like you to look at them,” he had replied, throwing the photograph into a drawer. And then he had said, with a smile: “ They belong to ‘ old unhappy far-off things, and battles long ago.’ ”

Did they? That was the question she now put to herself, and vainly tried to answer. It is permitted even to the most confiding of women to entertain occasional doubts as to the ingenuousness of bachelor friends.

At last she drew a sheet of note-paper from the stationery case in front of her and inscribed the date. But she paused, and gazed absently at the wall, her mind full of Hugh's dilemma. She felt an unaccountable dislike for the woman with the ophidian eyes. Presently she broke into a little laugh.

“ I do believe I am jealous! I must tell Gerard.”

CHAPTER VIII

AN anxious face met Hugh as he was shown into the drawing-room. Minna had grown into a woman since her illness, and had hardened considerably during the process. Instead of the lazy uplifting of silky lashes, veiling swimming eyes, with which she had been wont to greet him, she met him with a glance as keen as his own. The racial spirit of bargain revealed itself in her expression. Once more he was struck by the latent power of strength and hardness. She wore a dark red dinner dress and heavy gold bracelets, and a diamond star shone in the dark clusters of her hair.

"I am glad you have come early," she said, receiving his kiss mechanically. "I wanted to have a word with you before papa comes down."

They walked slowly to the fireplace and stood turned towards each other, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"Well?" he said.

"When are you going to tell papa?"

"After dinner—'over the walnuts and the wine.'"

"Don't. Wait until you have said good-bye to me."

Idols

"How shall I let you know the result? You will be anxious."

"Do you mind coming to me afterwards—the old way?"

"Not at all. But I shall have to wait outside until the house is quiet."

"There will be a nice fire upstairs to warm you."

"And my wife's heart?"

"That depends," she replied, with a curious smile. "Shall you be perishing for it?"

"We must try to win back to each other again, Minna," he said, stretching out his hand so as to touch lightly her cheek. "It will not be hard, for circumstances will be more favourable than they have been. I am afraid I haven't played a very noble part, my dear—and when a man is conscious of that, he vents his spleen upon others. That's not very noble either, but it's miserable human nature. Do you understand?"

"I am glad you see that you have treated me badly," she said. "At any rate it's a hopeful beginning."

The thought of her failure to grasp his meaning was dancing irritatingly in his mind as he stepped forward to greet Israel Hart, who at that moment entered the room.

"Very pleased to see you, Mr. Colman. Sorry I'm late. Kept in the city. Cold, isn't it?"

Idols

He rubbed his soft palms together and held them out to the blaze of the fire.

“How’s business? Been letting loose lots of lucky gaol-birds lately?”

“Oh, we always believe firmly in our clients’ innocence,” retorted Hugh with a laugh.

“That’s more than I do in mine,” said the money-lender.

The young man returned a light answer, but curled his moustache, and drew himself up with unconscious haughtiness. The touch of vulgarity jarred upon him. When one has to humble one’s pride before a man, one is apt to become supersensitive of such things. Unfortunately for Hugh, Israel evinced a more genial and familiar mood than usual, and, during the elaborate meal that followed, allowed himself privileges of allusion that a finer taste would have restrained. Aware of the senselessness of feeling chafed at what, on other occasions, he would have let pass almost unnoticed, Hugh conversed with a great outward show of good-humour. But once or twice he caught Minna’s eyes fixed on him in a malicious smile, which irritated him still further. The courses seemed infinite. His host referred to each, now praising the merits of his cook, now estimating its money value. As he grew more genial, the more did he throw off the cloak of breeding that at times he well assumed, and display the inevitable, impregnating colour of his mind. To the

Idols

man of artistic temperament money had no intrinsic value. It merely represented power over the beauty and charm of life. To the Jew financier, the making of it was an absorbing pursuit. Its possession was an end in itself. He had his being in an atmosphere of money; could scarcely conceive different environment—just as the average gamekeeper cannot realise a life in which rabbits and partridges play no part. As the bookmaker talks inevitable turf, so Israel talked inevitable money.

“Has my daughter ever shown you those bracelets, Mr. Colman? They’re almost historical. Been in a great nobleman’s family for centuries. Take one off and show it to Mr. Colman. The present countess came to grief horse-racing—applied to me for money. Those were part of the security. The same lady tried to do me with some paste diamonds, but I was down too sharp. Solid things, aren’t they?”

“I come in for a lot of the plunder, don’t I, papa?” said Minna, gaily.

Hugh winced. Hitherto she had always expressed the profoundest distaste for her father’s profession. Was this speech genuine, was it pure malice, or was its intention that of keeping a stern parent in good-humour? To save the situation he handed it back to Minna with a little courtly bow.

“It has never adorned a fairer arm,” he said.

Idols

Minna's quicker ear caught an ironical note, and she bit her lip. But Israel was delighted.

"I like to hear a young man pay a pretty compliment," he said, rolling back in his chair. "The art is dying out."

When Minna rose, Hugh held the door open for her. On passing him she whispered:

"You are making a wonderful impression; keep it up."

He bowed, closed the door upon her and came round to the fire, hating the part so bluntly defined by his wife. To have to cajole this somewhat vulgar old Jew of shady profession, his actual father-in-law! It was trailing his pride in the mud. But he had been doing so ever since the disastrous day of his marriage. A little extra soiling, he reflected cynically, would make but faintly appreciable difference.

The grave butler entered with coffee and cigars. Hugh declined the latter.

"Better have one," said Israel, carefully selecting. "Don't get this sort of thing every day. I give seven pound ten a hundred for them."

"I am a cigarette smoker," said Hugh, "but still——"

He accepted a cigar courteously. For he knew that a man is apt to be ruffled when you refuse an eighteen-penny havana, and he had good reasons for not wishing to ruffle his host. Presently they went

Idols

upstairs. Minna moved to the piano. Usually she played with taste and correctness. To-night she strummed abominably.

"We are not quite in the mood for Chopin," said Hugh, who was turning over her leaves. She stopped dead.

"No. This is more suitable to one's irritation," and she plunged into Stephen Heller's *Tarantella*. The old man, dozing in his chair, did not notice the change.

"Don't give it away at once," she said in a low voice, as she played. "Begin with a formal demand in marriage and see how he takes it."

"I shall do whatever seems to me judicious," he answered, curtly.

"Remember I am an interested party," she retorted. "There is such a thing as money to be considered, however much you may despise it."

"You may trust to my not forgetting," he replied.

The evening was over at last. He bade Minna good-bye.

"I should like to say a few words to you, Mr. Hart, before I go," he remarked on his way downstairs. His host, cordiality itself, showed him into his study, poked the fire and lighted a cigar.

"Business?"

"Yes."

"About the loan? I was wanting to discuss it.

Idols

Best now, when we're comfortable. Wait a moment—allow me. What is the chance of your being left a small legacy?"

"None whatever, I fear," replied Hugh.

"It is devilish hard lines on me, Colman, you know. When I advanced you that money, I thought your inheritance was as safe as a mortgage. You are aware it is not my usual way of doing business. This is not an actual reversion; it's only a convenient term. But I liked you, and somehow it's pleasant now and then to do a friend a good turn."

"I am deeply aware of all that," said Hugh.

"And, as I mentioned, I considered the security safe."

"So did I. You can scarcely blame me."

"I believe you," said the old man, cordially.

"You meant to play square, I know. Otherwise you wouldn't be here, would you? But, all the same, if your uncle were to die to-morrow, I should be done out of £5,000. I don't pretend to say that £5,000 would break me. Thank God I can run to six figures with something bigger than a '1' in front any day, when all is called in. But money is money. Now, as a gentleman, would you feel morally justified in abiding by your legal rights?"

"No," said Hugh, "I wouldn't. But circumstances——"

"I know," interrupted the money-lender, with

Idols

upraised hand. "They aren't quite yet what they ought to be. But you are going to be a successful man. They will alter. Now I have a friendly proposal to make to you."

"And I am coming with one to you, Mr. Hart," said Hugh, with a smile. "And I think you had better hear mine first. You consider me an honest man?"

"I do."

"And you don't disapprove of me personally?"

"On the contrary, I'm very pleased and proud to call you a friend of mine. You wouldn't have had my money otherwise."

"Then, Mr. Hart, you make easier what I have to say. It concerns your daughter, Miss Hart."

"What? Minna—my daughter?" said the old man, with a sharp change of tone.

"I have the honour to ask you for her hand in marriage."

"You!"

An indescribable change came over the old man's face. Instantly it lost the sleek and coarse materialism of the money-getter, the half-sensual content of the easy-going man who has well dined, the patronising geniality of the prosperous host. A fire glowed in his eyes. His Jewish features seemed to grow more prominent. The grey beard framed a strange, patriarchal dignity. The Jew, proud and unconquered

Idols

through centuries of oppression, overwhelming all other accidents of life in the eternal arrogance of race, was regarding, with angry and incredulous scorn, the Gentile, the hybrid child of yesterday.

"You!" he repeated, almost insultingly.

The young man's quick blood flamed in his cheeks. He started to his feet.

"Yes, I. Why shouldn't I?" he cried in a loud voice.

At that moment the door opened, and the butler entered, bearing a tray with spirit-case and glasses. Hugh turned quickly, and bent towards the fire with a spill, to light a cigarette. The butler set his tray-load on the great library table, secured the windows of the room and drew the curtains, which had remained looped back.

"You need not sit up, Samuels," said Israel. "I will let Mr. Colman out and lock up."

With discreet thanks the butler withdrew. Hugh threw his cigarette into the grate, put his hands into his pockets and faced his host once more.

"I consider my proposal is quite justifiable, Mr. Hart."

"Are you aware what you are asking?"

"Yes. I am a poor man. She is rich. I owe you money. But still——"

"Money? What has money to do with it?" interrupted the Jew, grandly. "If you had the

Idols

rent-roll of the Grosvenors it would make no difference."

"If it's a question of religion—I always thought your views were latitudinarian."

"I suppose Minna knows of this?" said Israel, apparently disregarding the remark.

"Certainly."

"Mr. Colman, I have no wish to wound your feelings. But I would sooner have my daughter dead at my feet than see her married to a Christian."

"Then it is useless to ask for your consent?"

"Quite useless."

"In that case I fear we shall have to do without it. I am exceedingly sorry to cause you pain—but the marriage will take place."

Israel rose from his chair and poured some whiskey into the glasses, and made a courteous motion with his hand towards the siphon of soda-water.

"We stand on opposite sides of a great gulf. I am a Jew. You are a Gentile. We need not discuss the question. I can't restrain my daughter from carrying out her wishes. But I can solemnly curse her after the manner of my people, and cut her adrift from me for ever. I shall warn her. The wrath of the Almighty will be on her head. She will also be disinherited."

"That will ease my mind of a great burden," said Hugh.

Idols

"To show you that it is no animosity towards you personally that influences me," continued Israel, with great dignity, inconceivable of the man of an hour before, "I will let you see a copy of my will made some time ago when the thought of you as a suitor never crossed my mind."

He drew a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened the great safe. From a locked compartment he drew forth a document, and, folding it so that only the particular paragraph should be visible, he showed it to Hugh. Nothing could be more explicit. In the event of Minna marrying a Gentile all the estate would pass from her and be devoted to specified Jewish charities.

"I hope Minna will be able to persuade you to a more favourable view of the case," said Hugh.

"My daughter can do many things, but not that. She despises her people, I know. But she shall marry among them or be cut off from our congregation for ever."

"There seems nothing more to be said, Mr. Hart," said Hugh.

"You quite realise that when my daughter leaves this house, the clothes that cover her will be her sole possession?"

"I have told you—I am immensely relieved. As to our business relations——"

"They can be discussed on a future occasion."

Idols

Proud as he was of his birth and breeding, Hugh could not but be abashed before this pride of race that transformed the vulgar usurer into a gentleman of fine feeling. Israel's words and attitude had not conveyed the slightest reproach on the score of fortune-hunting. He had cast neither his poverty nor his debt in his teeth. A great feeling of respect for the old man rose in his heart.

"Believe me," he said after a turn across the room; "if fate would allow it, I would give up the idea for your sake."

"We all make our destiny," replied the old man, bitterly. "I have made mine."

A few moments later Hugh took his leave. Israel accompanied him to the front door, shook hands with him, and, turning out the light in the hall, went back to his study. Then he remembered that he had forgotten to secure the door.

"I will do it afterwards," he said to himself.

He picked up the will, glanced through it and replaced it in the safe. For half an hour he sat in deep thought; then rose, went upstairs and returned, bringing with him a small padlocked ledger. He sat down in his writing-chair by the table, but remained in deep thought, tapping the unopened book with his fingers.

"My own daughter—Sara's child—married to a Christian."

Idols

Long he sat in an awful loneliness, his eyes dull and weary, looking at the spectres of the past. At length he took from a drawer at his side a double sheet of blue foolscap, and dipped a pen very slowly in the ink.

“ *I, Israel Hart, will and bequeath——*”

“ No,” he said. “ Not now—I must think it out again. Ask God for guidance.”

He rose, put the paper in the fire, and sank into the great armchair close by. And there he sat, thinking, thinking. At last his eyelids closed and he slept.

Hugh went out into a night of utter blackness and icy sleet. Great splashes of half-melted snow fell against his face and oozed down in liquid. He made his way along the drive and out of the front gate. Dimly through the darkness the sound reached him of the Sunnington clock striking the half hour. Half-past eleven. He would wait till twelve before keeping his appointment with Minna. A mile up the Heath Road and a mile back would fill up the time. He walked on through the darkness, splashing through the mud and drawing his head down into the collar of his ulster so as to keep the frozen rain from his neck. Not a soul was visible. On his return he saw a bull’s-eye lantern flash within the grounds of a house. It was a policeman examining the fastenings. Hugh hurried on, turned down the lane that led from the

Idols

Heath Road to the wood and waste lands behind The Lindens. At last he came to the brick wall enclosing the property. A key in his possession opened a small side door leading into a garden which Minna's caprice had made so exclusively her own, that entrance to it was not practicable from any portion of the grounds. On the right were green-houses, closing off egress from the back-while, following the line of the side of the house, a thick box hedge ran to meet the front wall, and thus separated the little pleasure from the front lawn, through which curved the carriage drive.

The house was in total darkness, scarcely discernible against the pitch-black sky. Hugh crossed the turf, walking warily so as to avoid the shrubs with which it was thickly planted, ever and anon thrusting his hand through the icy, dripping foliage.

"Thank Heaven this is the last time," he muttered to himself.

He came to the house, to whose walls stretched the carpet of turf. A low verandah, reached by a flight of steps, and communicating with the interior by means of French windows, now closely barred, extended not quite the breadth of the building. Masking its end rose a tall clipped yew. Behind this he crept, and a low window, whose sash he lifted, thanks to Minna's previous unbarring, admitted him into the house. It was a tiny chamber, used by Minna as a dark-room during an intermittent photographic fever.

Idols

Outside this was a heavily carpeted staircase, up which Hugh stole noiselessly.

The handle turned smoothly beneath his grasp, and he found himself at last in his wife's presence. The large room was lit only by the leaping flames of the fire, that threw quick flashes on the richly curtained bed and the luxurious appointments of a wealthy woman's bedchamber. In a long chair before the fire, the tips of fur-lined slippers thrust on bare feet, resting on the fender, lay Minna. She wore a rich dressing-gown, with lace at throat and wrists. Her dark hair clustered about her shoulders. A delicate odour of toilette-washes and powder hung on the warmth of the room. Hugh stopped for a moment on the threshold, with a little catch at his breath. The subtle charm of the woman's shrine stole gratefully over him. After all, it was sweet to have the right of such intimacy. He took off his dripping ulster and laid it aside before coming forward. Then he stooped and kissed her.

"Oh! how wet you are!" she cried, with a little grimace, rubbing her cheek with her handkerchief. "Do come and dry yourself. You will find your slippers in the secret drawer, as usual."

She handed him a key which she took from her dressing-gown pocket, and while he was changing his wet boots:

"Well?" she said. "What news?"

Idols

"Bad. Your father will not consent, because I am a Christian. We shall have to elope."

"Then you haven't told him all?"

"No. I thought it wiser. There seemed no necessity. It will be better for us to get married again—publicly."

He drew up an armchair by her side, close to the fire, and, leaning forward, warmed himself appreciatively.

"It's an infernal night. You don't know how sweet and cosy it is here."

"It was kind of you to come," she said, with cold politeness.

Her tone chilled the reviving glow of his imagination, which already was beginning to picture gentle possibilities of their married life. He remained silent for some time. When he spoke again, it was in less genial accents.

"I am afraid, Minna, that in marrying me you have unwittingly made a tremendous sacrifice."

"Not more than most women, I suppose."

"Unfortunately, yes."

With much tact and delicacy he put her in possession of all the details of his recent interview. She said not a word until he had finished, but clenched her fingers on the arms of her chair and looked rigidly into the fire.

"I had an awful horror of this," she said, in a toneless voice.

Idols

"It will make an enormous difference to you. God knows I realise it. But, after all, we shall not starve."

She darted a quick, sidelong glance at him, then, with a shudder, put her hands before her face.

"I knew it would be woe and misery," she said, "whilst we were walking away from that horrible registrar's office. Oh, God! I wish it had never been!"

"It need not be misery. It shan't be misery, if I can help it."

"You? You have robbed me of my birthright!"

"Perhaps your taunt is just, Minna," he replied, a scornful generosity forgetting that with her had lain considerable initiative in the matter of the marriage. "But it scarcely can mend our happiness."

"Happiness!" she echoed, contemptuously. "A poky little house, and rechauffé dinners, and a cheap gown once a year. The gingerbread would have been pretty enough ten months ago. Now the gilt is off."

With great patience, knowing that on him, the man, the stronger, the more rational, the less in love of the two, rested the responsibility of the disaster, he strove to reassure her, to paint their coming life together in the most cheerful colours. Grand style of living he could not offer her. But comfort, a certain social position, clever and bright society—all that was within his reach. He had done her a wrong in

Idols

marrying her, would repair it by devoting the rest of his life to her happiness. He pleaded to a hardened heart. She either listened stonily or broke into petulant recriminations. The talk grew spasmodic, interrupted by long gaps of silence. Imperceptibly the night wore on. Once he noticed that she had fallen into a weary doze. He watched for a long time her face, lit up by the flickering flames. How hard and common and sullen it had grown! He read in it the history of the last few months—of her previous life—of her soul. A revulsion of feeling turned his heart against her and against himself. The man with ambitions and wide interests in the world of action revolted against the slavery to such a woman.

There was little use in staying longer. He rose to go. His movement startled her, and she opened her eyes.

"Don't go yet. I am not asleep. I have been thinking."

He sat down again, watched her as she looked into the fire with eyes that in the fantastic light seemed haggard, and waited for her to speak.

"I cannot forfeit my money," she said. "It would kill me. Even if I loved you I couldn't do it. And you have made me hate you. Our living together as you propose would be a ghastly mockery. I could not share the same room with you any more," she continued, hurriedly, "not for millions!"

Idols

"I should not desire it," he replied, coldly.

"Then why should we not keep our secret—as we have kept it—and part now, for ever and ever?"

She turned eager, imploring eyes upon him, yet hard as agates.

"I don't quite understand," he said.

"It is not difficult. You have told no one of our marriage?"

"Not a soul."

"Is it likely that it will ever be made public from the registrar's office?"

"Practically impossible."

"Don't you see, then? Anna, the only interested witness, is as faithful as a dog—the other witness and the registrar have forgotten our existence—don't you see that for all practical purposes the fact of our marriage lies buried in a book in Brighton that no one will ever look at? that, if we give ourselves out as unmarried to the end of our lives no one will be a bit the wiser? We will never see each other again, except accidentally in the streets. We will wipe each other clean out of our lives and start afresh. Isn't that possible?"

"Yes," he replied, "it is perfectly feasible."

"I shall keep my money—spend it as I like—go where I like. You shall be free to do whatever you want—marry, if you choose—why shouldn't you?"

"It happens to be a felony," said Hugh.

Idols

"That would be your own look out. I should never take any steps to prosecute, you may be quite sure. Will you give me the same freedom?"

"You must let me think before I answer," he said.

"Take your time," she replied, and lay back again in her chair, covering her eyes with her hands. For the second time Hugh replenished the fire. From outside came still the confused sougning of the wind, and strange creakings filled the sleeping house. The wing that Minna occupied was far apart from the other bedrooms. Only Anna, who was sleeping close by in Minna's dressing-room, was within earshot. At any time they could talk in moderate tones and be secure from discovery; on this blustering night scarcely any caution was necessary. Absorbed in this final settlement of their lives, neither of them noted the passing of the hours. After a long interval of deep consideration, Hugh agreed to the main of her proposal, and there followed a full and anxious debate upon points of detail.

"What do you propose to do—to get through your life?" he asked at length.

"I shall go abroad—to gay places. I shall procure a companion to suit me—money can do most things. I may first go with Anna to Smyrna and hunt up my mother's people. They may prove interesting. I can't live on any longer here."

"I thought not. It was to escape this that you

Idols

were willing to live with me, had your father consented."

"Exactly."

Another long pause. Hugh viewed the new position in all its aspects. Humanly speaking, the secret of their marriage was exclusively their own. Anything like a reconciliation was out of the question. If he had spoiled her life by marrying her, he could make reparation by this irregular divorce. Yet he felt bound to give her old love one more chance.

"Are you certain, Minna, that you care for me no longer—in no way?"

"Oh, don't re-open that," she said. "All that was killed for ever—at Brighton—in December. And even if it wasn't, do you think I could willingly give up two hundred thousand pounds for you?" She laughed scornfully. "You indeed set a high value upon yourself. Do you know," she added with a sudden firmness, to which the deep tones of her voice gave a savage intensity, "I would commit any crime rather than give up that money? All such talk is useless. Let me have your final answer and be done with it."

"Very well," he replied, decisively. "I will grant you your absolute freedom on one condition: that this compact between us is irrevocable."

"It shall be. Will you swear to it, on your side—a solemn, binding oath?"

Idols

"I give you my word of honour."

"I don't much believe in a man's honour," she said, contemptuously. "An oath is different."

"I will do as you like," he replied.

She rose, vanished for a moment among the shadows of the room, and returned with an Old Testament.

"I swear on this, by the God of my fathers, that in no circumstances whatever will I reveal the fact of my marriage with you. I renounce you for ever as my husband. I renounce all claims upon your support, sympathy, and consideration. I swear never to interfere in any shape or form with your actions, leaving you free to marry again without any previous notification to me. So help me God."

She stood deadly pale, her teeth chattering, worn out by the stiffness and exhaustion of her long vigil, and handed him the book that she held in shaking fingers.

"Since you desire a formal oath," he said, "I will take it in the form you have prescribed."

And there he renounced her eternally as she had just before renounced him.

He looked at his watch. To his utter astonishment it was past six o'clock. With an exclamation of dismay, he set about preparing for departure.

How the night had passed so quickly he could not tell.

"There is no need for you to keep these any longer," he said, holding up the slippers. She her-

Idols

self had worked them for him in a fit of adoring industry.

"No. Nor the other things."

She took a small bundle neatly wrapped up in brown paper and handed it to him. He thrust it beneath his arm.

"Good-bye, Minna," he said, holding out his hand.

"We did not swear to be enemies. May your new life be happier than the old."

"It could not well be more miserable," she answered. But she gave him her hand, cold and nerveless.

"Poor child," he said, "God help you."

He turned, left the room, and then the house by the way by which he had entered. A fine snow was falling through the not yet lifting darkness. He hurried homewards blindly, thinking of nothing but the strange chapter of the night, his heart relieved already of enormous burdens, but his temples throbbing with the strain of casting them off.

He met not a soul until he had passed the Merriams' house. Then, as he neared the town, dark, straggling figures of workmen passed him, trudging on sleepily through the snow and darkness.

The hall porter was just opening the great outer door of the mansion when he arrived.

"Cold morning, sir," said the porter.

"Bitter," he replied, mechanically, and he sprang up the stone stairs.

CHAPTER IX

HE threw off his dress clothes with the repulsion that every man feels for such garments after an all-night sitting. He was tired out, capable only of attending to the trivial and personal things that immediately concerned him; thanked God, with the fervour which the average man expresses for none but the trifling mercies of Providence, that no case compelled his attendance in court at ten o'clock; stretched himself, yawned, stumbled shiveringly into bed, where, drawing the bedclothes tightly around him, he sank at once into the heavy sleep of the weary man. A confused sound broke upon his slumbers. In a waking dream it seemed to him that Minna was battering with a hammer at some formless material object which his mind identified as marriage. He awoke to find the noise that of knocking at his door. In reality, he had slept some hours, but he was conscious of only a few minutes' repose. He called out angrily to be left alone. The knocking continued. He called out again. Then a strange voice was heard.

"Can I see you for a minute, sir?"

Idols

Exasperated, he jumped out of bed and opened the door.

“What the devil is it?”

He recoiled in some astonishment at the sight of Israel Hart's butler, Samuels. The man looked greasy, unkempt, agitated. Behind him flashed the retreating figure of Mrs. Parsons, the porter's wife.

“Come in, if you want to speak to me,” said Hugh, for the cold draught was sweeping down the passage through the open flat-door. Samuels obeyed.

“An awful thing, sir. I think you had better come round at once. My master was murdered during the night.”

If he had suddenly received a blow from a life-preserver, Hugh could not have been, for the moment, more stunned and dazed.

“Murdered—your master—last night?”

He stared at the man. It was inconceivable. The incredible horror of it was that he had passed the night, keenly awake, in the house. Israel Hart murdered, a few yards away from him, without uttering a cry, giving out a sound in the death-struggle—it passed realisation.

“Yes, sir, in his study,” said the butler with tears in his eyes and with quivering lips. “The housemaid found him at a quarter to seven this morning.”

“How did it happen?”

Idols

"Someone hit him with something heavy—just over here."

The man passed his hand upwards from his temple to his skull.

"It has been terrible work this morning," he added, with a shiver.

The first shock over, Hugh recovered his balance.

"I will come with you at once. Tell me the details while I dress."

And while he hurried into his clothes and afterwards ate a crust of bread and drank a cup of coffee, Samuels told his story. In brief, what had occurred was this. The housemaid, coming to lay the study fire, had discovered her master lying huddled together on the hearth-rug. As she approached with her candle, a glance had showed her a streak of blood in his grey hair. She had screamed, rushed up to Samuels and given the alarm. He had come down, seen the body, recognised that life was extinct, had sent out at once for a doctor and a policeman. Pending their arrival, he had caused Miss Hart to be roused by her maid, and had remained in the study to prevent any of the servants disturbing the arrangements of the room. Miss Hart had come downstairs, wild with terror, and had fainted away, so that she had to be carried up to bed again. The policeman had come in the course of a few minutes, followed soon afterwards by the doctor, who was a near neighbour. Then the Inspector had

Idols

arrived, and later a Scotland Yard official, and they were at present engaged in investigations. There did not seem to be the slightest clue. It was an awful mystery.

"And Miss Hart—how was she when you left?" asked Hugh, as they went down the steps of the mansion.

"It seems she came to very soon, sir," answered Samuels, "and then she would dress and come down, and now she's bearing up wonderfully. It was she and the Inspector that agreed you were to be fetched, as you were the last person—except the other—that saw him alive."

"Yes," said Hugh, "I remember him telling you to go to bed."

"Oh, I saw him again after that, sir, when he went upstairs."

"Then how could I be the last? Besides I thought he was found in the study—I don't follow you."

"He went upstairs to get something from his bedroom safe—and then went down again. I was seeing to the fire in his room—and he told me again to go to bed. I thought you were still there, sir."

"What time was that?" Hugh asked, sharply.

"That was five minutes to twelve."

"Oh, I left him at half-past eleven," said Hugh.

They arrived at The Lindens. A knot of idlers were standing at the gates discussing the straws of

Idols

information that floated among them. A policeman on duty marched slowly round the drive, his footprints indistinguishable from countless others that had broken up the thin and melting coat of snow. On the steps stood an Inspector in talk with a couple of pressmen, who were taking notes with red, cold fingers.

The Inspector touched his cap as Hugh came up.

"A shocking affair, sir. If you will go in I will see you in a moment."

Hugh entered, went up to the fireplace in the hall and warmed his hands, wondering at the force of routine which had caused this fire to be lit on a morning of such upheaval. The slight sound of an opening door made him turn, and then he saw Minna's pale and haggard face. She beckoned to him hurriedly and disappeared into the dining-room. He followed her, shutting the door behind him. The sight of the room brought a fresh shock of associations. Was there ever such a ghastly morrow to a feast?

Minna stood by the table, one hand behind her resting upon it, her eyes meeting his in dull defiance. She checked brusquely his first half-articulated exclamation of sympathy.

"Yes. I know all that you can tell me. We can't waste time over it. Have you spoken to the Inspector?"

"Not yet."

"Thank God I've seen you first. This does not

Idols

interfere with our compact. You won't say a word about seeing me last night?"

"Certainly not," he replied, turning away from her with a feeling of repugnance. "As far as your father is concerned, I left this house at half-past eleven."

She closed her eyes with a sigh of relief.

"I was afraid you might betray me—not wilfully—but indiscreetly."

"Has this been your dominant emotion all the time?" he said, harshly. "I am glad our ways lie separate."

"I have my interests to protect," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders, walked past her to the fireplace and leant his broad shoulders against the black marble mantelpiece. Her selfishness dumbfounded him. Her eyes bore no trace of tears, her attitude not a suggestion of grief. Ill and worn she looked; but from shock and strain and anxiety—not from sorrow. Had she no human feeling? And yet she was the same woman whose heart had throbbed with wild tumult against his; whose eyes had glowed with a burning passion in their slumberous depths; whose voice had melted into murmurings like the deep notes of the mating dove. Once he had compared her in his mind to a volcano. The aptness of the similitude occurred to him now. She had passed through her period of eruption. Now the molten fire of her nature was cold and unlovely lava.

She moved suddenly from the table with the drag-

Idols

ging step of exhaustion, and flung herself into a chair and lay with her head bowed upon her arm.

"I know how you judge me," she said, hoarsely. "You have always judged me, and that is one of the things that made me hate you. You think I ought to be in floods of tears. So I should have been, if it had not been for last night. But I must protect myself now or never. No one can do it for me. How was I to know that you would be discreet? I had ruin staring me in the face. I have strained every nerve to keep my wits till you came. You can't tell the agony of the strain. How could you? And this awful horror overwhelming me. Oh, God—don't you think I feel the horror of it?"

She did not raise her face, but remained with it buried on her arm in an attitude of profound prostration. Soon a shudder ran through her frame. She began to moan and sob. An impulse of pity brought him to her side.

"If I can be of any help to you, Minna, you only have to command me."

But she did not heed him, only waved him away with her free hand.

"Go—leave me," she said, scarce audibly.

"If you want me, send for me and I will come," he said. He left her, went into the hall, where he found the Inspector. To the latter's questions he gave what formal answers lay in his power. A news

Idols

agency representative joined them soon afterwards. Gradually Hugh acquainted himself with all the meagre facts in the possession of the police. Mr. Hart had been killed outright by one blow of a blunt, heavy instrument. Death must have occurred during the small hours. The safe in the study was found open. The only article apparently missing from it was a black deed-box, which Mr. Hart's confidential clerk, who had been summoned immediately, stated to have contained bonds. There were no other signs of robbery. A thorough inspection of the premises had discovered no traces of burglarious entry, the only possibility of which was by means of a window that had been left unsecured. Footprints there were none, owing to the slight fall of snow. For the present the police were entirely at a loss.

"Do you know if Mr. Hart had any enemies?" asked the Inspector.

"A man in his profession comes into intimate relations with many people whom he could not call his friends," replied Hugh. "But I am not acquainted with any of his clients. As a private friend I always found him kind and generous."

"Could you supply me with any details concerning his private life?" asked the pressman.

"I am scarcely in a position to do so," replied Hugh, in a manner that precluded importunity.

He felt sick at heart, unhinged, and longed to

Idols

be free from the sordid horror of the house. His own hidden yet intimate connection with the tragedy of the night oppressed him like an incubus. It was he who had started the poor old man upon a train of thought and emotion that had kept him from his bed, where the murderer, if safe-robbery had been his only aim, might not have sought him. It was he who was responsible for the unguarded window by which the murderer had entered. And, then, the fact that he had been beneath the same roof discussing with the daughter her inheritance, while the father was being done to death downstairs, loomed grotesquely hideous before his eyes. It was like a situation in some vulgar melodrama where simultaneous action is represented in two separate and adjacent interiors.

At last he escaped police officials and reporters and found himself in the Heath Road, glad to breathe the outer air again, grey and misty as it was, covering the heath like a pall. Outside the Merriams' he paused, seized with a sudden desire for the comfort of Irene's voice and the sympathy of her clear eyes. Mere intimacy, too, required that he should inform her of the catastrophe. He entered with the latch-key, which he possessed by virtue of his intimacy, and knocked at the door of the smoking-room, where Irene always worked in the mornings. As soon as he appeared on the threshold, she rose quickly from her writing-table.

Idols

"You have come to tell me—I know it. The whole of Sunnington knows it—a dreadful thing—that poor little girl!"

"I have just come from the house," he said, gravely. "I had a short interview with her. It is a terrible shock, of course, but she is bearing it pretty well—better than I should have expected. You know I was dining there yesterday, so I was nearly the last person who saw him alive. For that reason they came to fetch me this morning."

"Tell me what you know about it," she said, drawing a chair towards him. He sat down and put her in possession of the facts, as far as they were known to the police. She listened intently, sitting by her writing-table, supporting her chin on her hand.

"And have they no clue at all?"

"None. The poor old fellow found murdered. A deed-box gone from the safe. A window left unsecured. Practically speaking, that is all they can go upon."

"Do you know, Hugh," said Irene, "I am convinced it was no common burglar. It was some desperate man who had borrowed money on some securities which he knew lay in that box, and he committed this crime to get them back. He was hiding in the house all the evening, possibly somewhere in the study—and he opened that window to escape by the back lane."

Idols

He smiled in spite of himself at her feminine certainty.

"I wish they would put you in charge of the investigations, Renie," he said.

"But don't you think my theory is quite plausible?" she asked, accepting his remark with a humble knitting of her brows. He admitted that it was, observed that he had spoken not in satire but in admiration. The police were standing about there, not knowing where to turn next.

"Well, the first thing," said Irene, "would be to list the securities in the deed-box—there must be a record of them somewhere—and then to investigate the actions last night of each of the clients to whom the securities belonged."

"I never thought of that," he exclaimed, sharply. "Yes, they'll do that, undoubtedly."

Irene went on to speak of Minna; of the girl's friendless isolation; of the help that she herself might have offered, had Minna not so resolutely repelled her advances. She would be even willing now to risk a breach of good taste if she could befriend her. She asked his advice. Her great-heartedness drew him very near to her—so near that it required a moment's struggle to stifle the craving to tell her all the miserable history of his marriage, and his own connection with the night's tragedy. How could he advise her in the matter, knowing, as he did, Minna's inveterate jealousy and dislike?

Idols

"I think she will have some of her own people with her," he remarked, mendaciously. "She said something about it this morning."

He rose to bid her good-bye. As she took his hand she scanned his face earnestly.

"You are looking so ill and worn," she said, affectionately. "Much more so than when you came in. It has been all this discussion."

"I'm afraid it is the want of my breakfast," he said, forcing a laugh.

All Irene's protective instincts were aroused.

"No breakfast—and you were going away without asking for anything to eat! Sit down at once and let me get something for you."

She ran out of the room in her impulsive way, leaving him standing on the hearth-rug.

"Good God," he said, throwing his hat and gloves onto the chair, "I never thought of it." And he remained staring blankly at a picture in front of him until Irene returned.

CHAPTER X

FROM that moment Hugh walked on the edge of a volcano. To keep his thoughts from dizzy hoverings over the abyss, he chained them down, with desperate will, to the work he had on hand. In a week's time would begin the February sittings of the Central Criminal Court. Good fortune had given him more than his usual share of briefs. One, a blackmailing case, made intricate by medical complications. His client, the defendant, a man in good position.

"If you can pull it off, Colman," said old Harroway, the solicitor, who had known Hugh from boyhood, "you'll go up like a released balloon."

He toiled at it night and day and held aloof from his kind. The publicity of his connection with the murder sickened him. He took cabs to and from his chambers lest his ears should be irritated by railway-carriage discussions. Minna he saw once, at the inquest, dressed in black, closely veiled, attended by the old Syrian woman. For appearance sake he had conducted her to her brougham. Had asked her one question on the way thither: Was she staying at The

Idols

Lindens? She replied in the affirmative. She had hitherto refused offers of friendly asylums. Anna's sympathy and protection sufficed her. What might happen later she did not know. Perhaps she would accompany Anna to Smyrna. The inquest resulted in a verdict of wilful murder against some person unknown. The next day he attended the funeral, walked, a haughty and tortured Gentile, amid a host of serene and money-lending Jews. The papers naturally reported the fact.

He did not go to the Merriams. Gerard's arrival in town was the occasion of a peremptory command to dinner from Irene. He declined, alleging press of work. Gerard, sent by Irene for tidings of the absentee, burst in upon him at ten o'clock that night and found him sitting with dishevelled hair on the edge of a tumultuous sea of brief papers. The genuineness of his excuse was obvious.

He forced, however, his visitor into a chair, handed the tobacco jar and poured out whiskeys and sodas. Gerard eyed the quantum of spirits in Hugh's glass; also noticed the corkscrew in the cork of the three parts emptied whiskey bottle.

"I say, you're going it pretty strong, aren't you?" he remarked, with a significant nod. "What is the matter—work—worry?"

"Both," said Hugh, putting down his tumbler and sweeping his moist moustache in his fierce way.

Idols

"The work to get over the worry, and the whiskey to get over the work."

"What's the worry—this Hart affair?"

"I suppose so. It has got on my nerves."

"I can't see why the devil it should," said Gerard, with a little contemptuous laugh. He was of that kind of men who deny the existence of nerves.

"By the way," he added, after awhile, "they were damned slack at that inquest—I was just saying so to Renie—with the safe open and ledgers and things lying about the table when the old man was found, had I been the coroner, I should have wanted to know the subject of your last conversation with the deceased."

To his surprise, Hugh sprang to his feet in a great excitement.

"For heaven's sake, old man, don't talk about it in that cold-blooded way. I am in a devil of a mess. I don't mind telling you now—but keep it dark from Renie—I owed Hart £5,000 on my expectations from the Brantfield property. He's had the bond—of course. I believe it was in that stolen deed-box—I was the last person in the house—no one saw me leave. Has Renie told you her theory of the murder?"

Gerard looked at him and whistled.

"That's how you staved off the bankruptcy, was it? I often wondered."

"Yes, that was how," said Hugh, laconically.

Idols

Gerard reflected, pulling at his pipe.

"I don't see anything to be nervous about. Unless you're keeping something back from me—human nature asserting itself—are you?"

"I tell you I'm in a devil of a mess," said Hugh. "I didn't mean to say anything about it. But I've told you so much. If you could help me, I would let you. The best thing is to go home to Renie—not just yet—and forget everything about it."

Gerard drew his eyelids together and peered at his friend, then rose and walked straight up to him.

"Do you mean to hint that you accidentally killed that old man?"

Hugh looked at him incredulously for a moment and then broke into a derisive laugh.

"You fool!" he said.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," laughed Gerard, returning to his whiskey and soda. Hugh seated himself again in his swivel-working library chair, and ran his fingers through his wavy hair impatiently.

"For heaven's sake let us talk of something else," he said. "What have you been doing with yourself in Edinburgh?"

Gerard prolonged his visit for a quarter of an hour, and then went home, leaving Hugh to his black-mailer's interests.

"You are back early," said Irene.

Idols

"Yes. He is in the midst of his briefs. He is a lucky beggar. I wish I had half as many as he."

"Why, you inconsequent dear," said Irene. "Only the other day you were saying you were tired of practice—wanted to give it up and travel. Surely '*semper mutabile*' ought to refer to men——"

"Well, why shouldn't a man get sick of work?"

Irene could find no reply, but laid her hand in his. Whatever Gerard said was right.

"How is poor Hugh?" she asked.

Gerard laughed with masculine ungraciousness and withdrew his fingers from her clasp, so as to press down the tobacco in his pipe.

"You always talk of Hugh as if he were a lad instead of a middle-aged man. He's all right. But he has some silly idea that he's in danger of arrest over this Hart affair."

"No!" cried Irene, quickly, looking at him with sudden scare in her eyes.

"It seems he was mixed up in money matters with Israel, and he was the last person with the old man."

"That is wrong. Hugh left at 11.30, and the butler saw Mr. Hart at twelve."

"I don't know," said Gerard. "It is all rubbish. There's something behind it that he wouldn't tell me. I know nothing of Hugh's private life. If he's in a mess, he'll get out of it this time as he has done before."

Idols

But Irene did not treat the matter so lightly. The face that met Gerard's somewhat shifty blue eyes was anxious and troubled. Suddenly, however, came the illumination of her smile.

"Of course you are right, dear love. It is all rubbish."

But far from rubbish proved Hugh's forebodings when he came home from chambers the following afternoon. Parsons, the hall porter, desired to speak to him, accompanied him up the stairs to his flat. He was an honest fellow, grateful to Hugh for countless careless generousities, and at the same time regarding him with respectful awe on account of his somewhat imperious manner. The seriousness of the communication he was about to make agitated him. With many hesitations he stumbled through his story. The police had been making enquiries, had learned the hour of his return on Tuesday morning, had cross-questioned Mrs. Parsons as to the condition of his clothes, as to his general habits; had enquired whether he was carrying a box or parcel.

"I was obliged to tell them that you were, sir," said the porter, greatly distressed. "Though I would sooner cut my tongue out than do you any harm, sir."

"Thank you, Parsons," said Hugh. "I am greatly obliged to you for telling me. I need not say that you can give the police any information con-

Idols

cerning me with a clear conscience. You can't possibly do me any harm."

The porter went away relieved. Hugh, left alone, went to his spirit-case on the sideboard and poured himself out a stiff glass of whisky. "It may be the last," he said to himself, grimly. He drank it off and lit a cigarette with fingers that trembled just a little.

"And now for Minna," he said, striding out of the room.

The expected blow had fallen. Arrest was certain. Unless he could account for his night, release was impossible. The circumstantial evidence which he knew could be brought against him was enough to imperil his life. And no one could be more acutely aware than he, a criminal advocate, of the possibility of a chain of specious links, unsuspected by him now, that might bring him powerless to the gallows. Now, the gallows is a gruesome thing, which an innocent man, full of the lust of life, cannot contemplate with equanimity.

The marriage could be concealed no longer. It was a matter of life or death. Then all would be well. Provided only he reached The Lindens before a hand was laid on his shoulder. Through the gathering darkness of the dreary February evening he hurried on the accursedly familiar road. It had never seemed so long. As he neared the vague form of the constable advancing on his beat, his heart throbbed

Idols

violently. Then he laughed scornfully at his fears. As if a policeman on duty would arrest him! Without a doubt he was being shadowed at this very moment, and when the time was ripe, a civil spoken officer in plain clothes would take him quietly and discreetly into custody. But he felt glad when the front door of The Lindens closed upon him and he found himself in the warm security of the hall.

Samuels, the butler, came down the stairs.

"Miss Hart is very sorry, but she cannot receive you to-day, sir."

"Is she in bed?"

"No, sir."

"Where is she?"

"In the drawing-room."

"Thank you, Samuels; I must see her."

And brushing past the rather bewildered butler, he mounted the stairs and entered the drawing-room unceremoniously. Minna rose angrily from her chair, keeping her thumb between the pages of the novel she was reading. Dressed in a loose dressing-gown, with her hair pinned up untidily, she was all the more incensed at his interruption.

"I told Samuels—" she began, with a petulant stamp of the foot.

"Yes, I know," he interrupted. "I disregarded him. This is not a time for politeness. The police are after me. I may be arrested at any moment.

Idols

They know that I did not reach home till the morning. I am caught in a trap. I must account for my actions between half-past eleven and seven."

She turned as white as a sheet. The novel slipped from her fingers to the carpet.

"Impossible," she said.

"What's impossible?"

"That they should arrest you. They have no evidence. Oh! it is absurd."

"Absurd or not, they will."

Rapidly he sketched his position. She listened motionless, and with quivering lips.

"What do you wish me to do?" she asked in a voice scarcely audible.

"It's obvious. You must release me from my promise. I must be able to account for my night—prove my statement."

"Forfeit my money!" she cried, terror raising her voice. "Do you know what that would mean to me? This wealth that my father got together is flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood. I can't give it up. It would kill me!"

"It would be your life for mine," he said, ironically.

"You have sworn," she said.

"If I had given my simple promise it would have been sufficient."

"Are you going to keep it?"

Idols

He drew himself up. "We will not discuss that," he said.

"Would they let you go if you told them?"

"Most probably."

"And if they did not?"

"There would be a very weak case against me."

"But a wife's evidence is invalid," she cried, eagerly seeking the loophole.

"There is Anna."

"But it would be against you to confess you were in the house at that time."

"Anna could swear to my entrance at twelve by the window."

"It might lead to my being arrested, too, as an accomplice."

"I scarcely think so," he replied, coldly. The interview was growing hateful. "We could have Anna as a witness to our conjugal relations. She could swear to entering our room at six to wake us—if the worst came to the worst, she might swear she found us asleep. Morality has its limits when it's life or death."

Minna sank into a chair and crouched there in a shaking terror.

"I can't—I can't—I can't lose my money."

"Very well," he said, "you may keep it. I shall take my chance."

"It would be the same," she said, hoarsely, "if

Idols

you said I was your mistress only. Goldberg is an executor under my father's will. He hates me—you know why. The clause in the will would put him on the scent. He would go to Somerset House and discover it all."

"If I am arrested and brought before the magistrate, can you expect Anna to be equally reticent?"

"Anna is an Oriental. Besides, she starts for Smyrna to-morrow morning."

"In the face of what I have just told you, will you let her go?" he asked, sternly.

"Oh, God!" she cried, leaping to her feet with sudden wild passion. "Don't torture me any more. You have caused enough misery in my life. Why should I sacrifice my heart's blood for you—on the first fanciful alarm of danger! Have you ever made one sacrifice for me? Even when you said you loved me, did you give up one hour's philandering with that other woman? You looked upon me at first as a toy to your hand—you told me so in this very room—to gratify your passions. You married me for my money. You condemned me to that life of scheming and falsehood. You were afraid to face my father like a man. You ruined my life—and now that I am about to build it up again—you come—I don't believe it—it is another lie—for some purpose of your own."

Hugh looked steadily at her for some moments, and, without condescending to reply, turned on his heel

Idols

and stalked towards the door. His hand was on the knob, when she rushed forward, caught him by the coat sleeve, and fell at his feet.

"Forgive me, Hugh. Forgive me—I did not know what I was saying—all this is driving me mad—forgive me—pity me—you once loved me Hugh—I can't lose my money—keep our secret for God's sake."

She sobbed out her incoherent and imploring words in hoarse, frightened tones. A wave of supreme scorn swept through him. Even an hour ago this craven agony of fear and avarice would have been inconceivable. But he raised her gently to her feet, and drew her a short way from the door. She stood trembling and shrinking before him.

"I have already told you, Minna," he said, in a low voice, "you can keep your money, if you value it more than my life."

In another moment he was gone. Minna staggered to a couch and lay there, her hands clutching at the loosened coils of her dark hair, in death grapple with the devils that had taken possession of her.

But none the less she parted from old Anna Cassaba the following morning without breathing to her a word concerning Hugh's danger.

"You will come very soon, dearie, and let me show you your dear mother's beautiful country?" said the old woman, amid the final adieux.

Idols

"Very soon," sobbed Minna, clinging round her neck. "And then we'll begin a new life and forget all this horror. I want to forget it all—forget I was ever married—forget his existence—and everything!"

Later in the day she accepted the urgently offered hospitality of Aaron Bebro, one of her father's oldest city friends, whose motherly wife, forgetful of past disdain and derision, gave her warm-hearted welcome. She took the girl to her capacious bosom and cried over her a little; and Minna was miserable and frightened enough to feel grateful.

During dinner that evening a servant entered and whispered into Mr. Bebro's ear. He rose hurriedly and left the room. Presently he returned looking greatly agitated. To his wife's enquiries he replied that it had been a business message. But Minna was seized with a horrible foreboding and sat through the remainder of the meal sick and dumb, while her kind hosts pressed upon her food and drink. She dared not ask, though she knew what the answer would be.

Dinner over, he signed to his wife and grown-up daughter to leave him alone with their guest.

"I have some very serious news for you, my dear young lady. A messenger from Scotland Yard came just now."

"Have they—arrested anyone?"

Idols

"The last person in the world one would have guessed. Prepare yourself for a great shock."

She writhed under these kindly futilities ; the more so because she knew that some expression of horrified astonishment was naturally expected from her. A ghastly farce.

"It is Mr. Hugh Colman. It seems impossible, but the officer told me there is a great deal against him."

She could express no surprise, but sat paralysed, dreading lest her apparent phlegm should give away her secret.

"There must be some mistake," she said, at last, hoarsely. "He was our friend—dining with us that night. And he went to the funeral."

"I remember seeing him there," said Aaron Bebro.

"Will he be brought before the magistrates in the morning?"

"Of course."

"Shall I have to go—to give evidence?"

"Not to-morrow, I am glad to say; but perhaps afterwards."

Minna rose from her chair.

"This is a dreadful shock," she said, in steadier tones, "and it has upset me. I think I shall go to my room. You will make my apologies to Mrs. Bebro—and thank you for your kindness."

She looked him full in the face and held out her hand, which he pressed warmly.

Idols

"You are a brave girl," he said. But once in her own room, her nerve gave way. She stood before the mirror and laughed hysterically.

"Yes," she cried, "I am a brave girl!"

CHAPTER XI

He was remanded for a week: a week of feverish public excitement and of great suspense for those that loved him. His name was dragged through the mire of the roadways, then held up to execration. He had feasted at an old man's table, and, before the generous glow of the host's wine had had time to cool, had foully murdered him for money. Imagination boggled at the conception of a meaner miscreant. Thus the man in the street, who is seldom guided by the abstract principle of British justice. The press began to spread abroad a horrible fame. A poet, a brilliant advocate, a man in the public eye; they extolled his achievements. Those to whom his name had been hitherto unknown forgot their ignorance and feigned long acquaintance. His poems were read by self-conscious hundreds. Stories of forensic triumphs recapitulated by half-penny evening newspapers, with sensational exaggeration, brought his fame as an advocate whither no poetry ever penetrated. His friends stood by sickened and helpless.

"If he gets off, there'll be a boom in Colmans," said a cynical clubman to a friend. "He'll be the

Idols

darling of the boudoir and the champion of the thieves' kitchen. He always was a lucky beggar."

"Hush, there's Merriam at your elbow," whispered the other.

But Gerard had overheard. He gave the speaker an inscrutable look and passed on.

Habitually taciturn, Gerard spoke very little of his feelings in the matter. His acquaintances who knew of the close friendship refrained from allusion. At home he smoked in silence. Irene, measuring his anxiety by her ideal of the love between Hugh and himself, respected his reserve. But her own pain burned within her and shone from her eyes in a strange light. She waited anxiously with him for a promised visit from Harroway, the solicitor, after his first interview with the prisoner. Harroway was shown into the smoking-room, sat on a straight-backed chair away from the fireplace, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. He was a short, stout, florid man, and had walked fast from the police station; trouble and perplexity had also disturbed legal coolness.

"It's like trying to ride through a brick wall," he said. "He won't open his mouth. Same story to me as to the magistrate. Can't bring a single witness to prove his whereabouts."

"That's absurd," said Gerard. "A man can't exist a whole night in London in Stygian solitude."

Idols

"That's what I told him. A cabman, a servant, a barman, a coffee-stall keeper—anyone would do. Somebody must have seen him. He says: 'I left The Lindens at eleven-thirty and I got home at six-thirty. Assume that I have lost my memory completely for those seven hours and do what you can for me.'"

"But can he have lost his memory?" said Irene.
"Such things have happened."

Harroway shook his head significantly. "Not he. It's pure suicidal obstinacy. You know the kind of man. I'm sure I don't know what to do. There's enough against him already—that confounded security of his was in the missing deed-box. God knows what more the police have up their sleeve. An alibi is the only thing. I told him. Replies that there is no question of proving an alibi. You know he might almost as well plead guilty at once. What is one to do, Merriam?"

"*Cherchez la femme*," replied Gerard.

"Well, can either of you give me any idea? You, Mrs. Merriam——?"

"There is someone he is fond of in a way," said Irene. "But who can it be? It is someone I don't know. But surely, if it is a woman, she will come forward."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Gerard.

"I asked him point-blank," continued Harroway,
"Is the woman——?" But before I could get any

Idols

further, he turns upon me with one of his Paladin airs, and tells me he never suggested that a woman was involved."

"That settles it," said Gerard. "Either that or guilt."

"Heaven knows," sighed Harroway. "And that's the man I had set my heart upon making the biggest criminal advocate of the day."

"Oh, you must go and use all your influence over him, Gerard," said Irene, anxiously.

"Do you think I have ever stopped him from doing a pig-headed action, all the years I have known him?"

"But he loves you above everybody. He must listen to you."

"Why not yourself?" asked Gerard, in a curious tone that caused the solicitor to glance sharply at him.

"We will both go, Gerard—together."

"Not a bit of good," said Harroway, rising to depart. "He sent many kind messages—says he'll write at length. But won't see you. Won't see a soul but me. He's as proud, in that cell, as Lucifer. But what the dickens he's got to be proud about in getting himself into this ghastly mess is more than I can imagine."

The solicitor gone, Irene turned to Gerard.

"Harroway thinks it will go ill with Hugh."

"So do I—if he keeps up this attitude."

"There is something beneath," said Irene, moving

Idols

to the stool by the fire, near his feet, and putting her hand on his knee. "We had a talk on the day before. I wrote to you at Edinburgh about it. He was on the point of committing some folly—hoped we would not think him a scoundrel. What does it mean?"

Gerard stretched out his arms and clasped his hands behind his head.

"I'm sure I don't know. The man was always like that. One never could tell his next escapade. What's the matter? You're shivering."

"Oh, I am frightened, Gerard, dear. I have a foreboding that ill will come of it—for all of us."

"What the dickens has it got to do with you and me?" said Gerard.

She sat silent for awhile, looking into the flaming abysses and fantastic crags of the fire. Then suddenly she turned, excited, clasped his knees and looked passionately into his face.

"We must move heaven and earth, Gerard. He is your second self. If he should—if anything should happen to him—he would be with us always, reproaching us with his dead eyes for not saving him. I owe him your life, my beloved—and mine—for without you I should die—Gerard, dear."

She was a little excited, spoke a trifle shrilly. Gerard unclasped his hands and bent forward. Interpreting the gesture according to her heart, she knelt

Idols

and swiftly closed his arms around her, and nestled close to him.

"You may be sure I shall do all I can," he said.

She closed her eyes. The man's calm strength of voice, the hidden strength of his frame reassured her fears.

"Forgive me for doubting while you are here to save him," she murmured, in her blind faith.

A few moments later some domestic duty summoned her away. Gerard rose, and stretched himself and yawned.

"Oh, damn!" he said, irritably.

Then, lighting his pipe, he strode out the house, and tramped along the Heath Road, with the air of a man who is justifying to himself a series of expletives.

The week expired. Hugh was again brought before the magistrates and committed for trial.

The key turned in the cell-door in Holloway Gaol, and he was left alone for the night. In a state of semi-sanity he abandoned himself to the ghastly panorama of the day, as it passed and repassed in incoherent fragments before his eyes. He was prostrate with fatigue and strain, utterly brain-weary, incapable of lucid arrangement of ideas, almost of calculating the weight of the evidence against him.

Fresh facts had been brought to light. The butler had heard him speak in angry tones when he had

Idols

entered the room with the spirit-tray. The entry in Israel's private ledger assigning the stolen deed-box as the depository of the £5,000 security had been confirmed by the confidential clerk. Moreover, the empty box had been discovered, broken open, in the trunk of a hollow tree in the wood behind The Lindens. The prisoner had returned with a mysterious parcel of which he could give no account. On searching his rooms after arrest, the police had found the grate full of scrupulously reduced paper-ash. The inference was that this ash represented the stolen bond. It was another instance of the irony that marked this extraordinary freak of circumstances. Even his careful destruction of Minna's letters and all memorials of her was turned into evidence against him. Medical testimony placed one o'clock and five as the extreme limits between which the murder could possibly have been committed. Probabilities pointed to three o'clock.

In his sleepless and disordered fancy, the witnesses jostled each other in the box, giving inconsequent scraps of evidence. But clearest before his mind rose the picture of Minna, his wife, the sole person in the universe that could be absolutely certain of his innocence. There she stood, appalling in the wreckage of her beauty, a thin, black, pinched figure, hollow-eyed, drawn-lipped, telling the half truth that was more damnable than a lie. She had parted from

Idols

Mr. Colman at eleven, had gone up to her room. Had heard no sound in the house till she was awakened in the morning to learn the horrible news. The relations between Mr. Colman and her father had always been most cordial. He had dined with them that evening, her father in the best of spirits. Mr. Hart had never mentioned that Mr. Colman was a client. Clients were not visiting acquaintances. That was all. She had not met his eyes, scarcely those of the Crown prosecutor or the magistrate when they questioned her. Had replied doggedly, in the deep, hard voice he had grown so familiar with of late. But one year ago it had stirred all the fibres in his body. To-day not a vestige of its richness remained.

She floated fantastic in his memories. Once during the night he fell into a brief half-sleep. She gave him again the brown-paper parcel—but loose this time, so that the paper slipped away, and revealed a halter. He woke sweating with the nightmare. Anything approaching sleep was thenceforth impossible. The dim, perpetual, inextinguishable light in his cell grew to a maddening irritation. He yearned for the soothing comfort of darkness. He wrapped his head in his bedclothes to shut out the light—but with the ill success familiar to all who have tried it. So, until the dawn, he remained staringly awake, and the phantasmagoria of his trial swept endlessly on.

Idols

Faces of friends, anxious, incredulous, seen in the crowded little court, rose up before him. Gerard's and Irene's most continuously. She wore a tight-fitting dark-blue jacket and a little toque to match, set amid the fair waves of her hair. He remembered vividly every detail—the white stitching of her black gloves. He strove to keep her image before him—the sweetness of her smile, the trust in her grey eyes. But Minna, hard and sullen, came and blotted out the more gracious fantasy. Again he recalled Irene—the last scene, before he was led away to the prison van, when friends crowded round the dock; Gerard among the first.

“It's bound to come right, Hugh. We'll do our best.”

Irene had struggled forward and the others had fallen back. And she had put up both hands, which he, leaning over, had taken in his; and he had seen the great pain burning beneath her eyes.

“Oh, Hugh, if our love for you can do anything—use it—God bless you!”

A hurried speech, uttered in the swiftness of the hand-clasp. He tried to keep it with him as a charm against the bugbears of the night. But until the warder came at half-past six to wake him, they swam before him in a whirling, reiterative circle, recurring almost rhythmically like the separate monstrosities of horses in an infernal merry-go-round.

Idols

Day came, and with it clearness of mind and logical sense of proportion. When Harroway, the solicitor, arrived, he discussed the situation with practised acuteness. His defence was clear. The stealing of the security was too ludicrous an expedient for a man of his intelligence. Besides, its legal value was that of a blank sheet of foolscap. Of this Hart's confidential clerk had full knowledge. Would a jury believe a man to be so idiotic as to commit a murder in order to steal that which he knew to be worthless? Was it likely that a man who had committed a murder at three o'clock would deliberately postpone his return home—a quarter of an hour's walk—until an hour when his arrival would be certain to attract attention? But Harroway shook his head dolefully.

"Of course we'll put all that forward. But the self-incriminating stupidity of criminals is a by-word. If the attorney- or solicitor-general is prosecuting and takes his privilege of answering Gardiner, he will convince the jury of this little fact. It would be much more to the point if you would tell us how to prove an alibi. That's the infernal part of it. No one is such a damned fool as to believe that you were lying drunk and invisible in a gutter all night. You *can* prove an alibi if you like, can't you?"

"Certainly," replied Hugh, with a baffling twirl of his moustache. "But I am going to do no such thing. Please consider that final. If you and Gar-

Idols

diner can't get me off without it—well, I'll hang. *Jourir, mourir et ne rien dire!* And that's the end of it."

He put his hands in his pockets and shrugged his shoulders magnificently. The stout solicitor rose with irritation.

"You are a confounded anachronism. You were meant for the Marquis de—de—God-knows-what in the French Revolution. You would think it a fine thing to stay the hangman until you had used your toothpick. You don't understand that a life like yours is of value nowadays. You are risking it—braving the gallows for some infernal woman. It stands to reason. I am sick of women!"

"So am I, Harroway," replied Hugh, coolly. "You seem to have got them on the brain. Let us change the conversation."

Soon afterwards Harroway departed, and the day wore on. The next passed and the next, and other days followed in dreary succession. They added ten years to his life. In spite of defiant resolve to consider no phase of the prison discipline and degradation, the taint of the cell ate into his flesh and weakened his soul with strange cowardices. Sometimes the weight of evidence crushed him overwhelmingly and he shook in an agony of terror at the consequences. The strain of silence and secrecy suffocated him. Like a diver who has just exceeded his habitual

Idols

period of immersion, he felt that in another moment his temples would burst and his heart fail. Then he would ask himself passionately the reason of his silence, rebel against the self-imposed imprisonment of speech. Was she worth the folly of this sacrifice—she whose inconceivable avarice seemed to have annihilated elementary human emotion? If the loss of her money should kill her—were it not better that she should die? To brave the trial, secure acquittal, live through the eternal after-stain of suspicion—for that he was prepared. But to face the gallows—accept her gift of the halter—his courage failed him. The cold sweat of the nightmare broke out from head to foot. He clung desperately to life.

Once a shaft of sunlight streamed into his cell and abutted on the opposite whitewashed wall. He sat on his wooden chair and leaned against the bed and watched the dust dancing in the gold. Touching some hidden chord of forgotten association—a child's poetic fancy long ago, perhaps, translating the glory of glistening motes in the quivering mystery of the beam—it awakened an unutterable torture of yearning for the free air of the world. He threw himself on the bed and buried his face in the pillow to prevent a cry from passing his lips.

But such crises of weakness were rare, and they were always followed by long intervals of dogged and half-cynical calm. He had sunk far beneath his ideals

Idols

of honour in his marriage with Minna Hart. Her taunts had been just. He, Hugh Colman, who had ever before sinned *en prince*, and had never shrunk from the eyes of man or woman, had played the part of a skulking villain. He had married her for her flesh, for her money, thereby wronging her. He had made her the toy of a week's passion, and then neglected and wounded her. Now was the hour, if any there could be in the world, when he might make expiation both to her and to himself. He would take his chance, meet his destiny, this time at any rate, like a man. He would not redeem twenty lives at the price of her money. In his contradictory way the man was as proud as Lucifer.

The knowledge of the anxiety of his sisters, the dear peaceful women who worshipped him as the paragon of all the excellencies, was a perpetual pain. He wrote to them reassuringly, minimised the danger, expatiated upon the point of honour, and, knowing their sensitive spot, brought forward, with some twinges of self-contempt, the family pride. Death before dishonour—but death a remote contingency; thus could his message be summarised. Old Geoffrey Colman, who had been illustrating the proverb that threatened men live long, also wrote on the subject of the family honour. To save it, he was willing to buy up the security—the history of the reversion was the property of a million wagging tongues. But this

Idols

Hugh peremptorily declined. The debt now lay between himself and Minna. There was the pound of flesh, but not a drop of blood. Sacred should be the letter of the law.

The days passed, he scarce knew how, eventless, dull, yet filled with cravings for the vivid life of action that had been first his inheritance and then his prize. Their inactivity weighed upon him. He envied his fellow-prisoners, upon whom sentence had been passed and who had their daily tasks to execute. Chapel, exercise, meals, reading, sleep—his sole avocations. Now and then came Harroway and with him Charles Gardiner, Q.C., his friend and counsel.

Other visitors he refused to receive. Sensitive and pliant as was his nature, yet it was traversed by a seam of flint that rendered it self-sufficing. He was one of those men, capable of chivalrous impulse and lasting loyalty, who nevertheless are unable to reveal themselves entirely to dearest friend or belovedest woman; who reserve, as a jealous right, a portion of themselves for their own exclusive possession. Not only were his lips of necessity closed on this matter, but also, in the battle against circumstances which he had undertaken to fight single-handed, too vivid expression of sympathy was distasteful. His sisters would have clung about his neck and unmanned him. Irene, who would have understood his reticence, he could not receive without Gerard. And his pride

Idols

shrank from the idea of meeting even Irene. The moment's speech and hand-clasp after the trial had been sufficient to convince him of her trust in his innocence. But the thrilling pity and admiration in her eyes, he could not bear. Already she had written: "You are shielding a woman's honour at the risk of your life; but what woman's trumpery honour is worth such chivalry?" And he had written back in grim truthfulness: "It is no woman's honour that I am protecting, and my attitude is far from heroic." But he knew her well enough to realise that she would not believe his disclaimer. To destroy her feminine conception of his character was impossible; but he could not bear to masquerade in her presence in the guise of a hero.

And Gerard? During the hours of solitude, when the confused impressions of past years had bitter opportunities of crystallisation, he had suffered the shock of the discovery that their present friendship was but the simulacrum of the old. A quaint fancy figured it forth in his mind. Once clad in shells of armour, as most men are clad, they had stood together, gauntleted hand in hand, for mutual defence and common purpose. Long since they had crept out, donned other mail, but still stood the hollow figures in futile clasp, somewhat of a mockery. And a woman came and led them, now and then, each into their old habitations, whereupon they moved the hands up and down, in spasmodic greeting.

Idols

Conceits aside, something had come between them. It was not Irene, he thought, for she had kept them together, making her boast of their perfect friendship. Was the phenomenon negative, merely the cessation of mutual attraction? He could not tell. It was sufficient dismay to find that, at this time of peril, there were many other men with whose companionship he could have borne sooner than with Gerard's. But rather than allow Irene to suspect this, he would have undergone any tortures of isolation. So he awaited his trial in proud loneliness.

And from Minna, not a sign of solicitude.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN a human being has not slept for five or six nights, especially if that human being is a woman of romantic temperament, many queer things are bound to happen. The sensory nerves become susceptible to impression from all influences that exist, and from many that do not. The head swells to an enormous size with its unrelieved store. Bells and music and the voice of an invisible person reading aloud an interminable and unintelligible book throb on the tympanum. Men and women have an uncomfortable way of growing suddenly large and then suddenly small before the eyes. The flesh seems disintegrated into elemental and quivering molecules. A sixth sense riotously develops, and makes the sufferer aware of a murderous devil dogging the footsteps. Under these conditions, to join in the small-talk of a family dinner table, do fancy work in the drawing-room and play Grieg on the piano to a virtuoso, argues a considerable reserve fund of moral power. And this is found more commonly in women than in men.

Until the day of Hugh's trial at the Old Bailey, Minna had successfully concealed her state from the

Idols

friendly eyes of the Bebro. She looked wretchedly ill, but a cunning shade of carmine relieved her haggardness and caused her to appear nothing more than interestingly afflicted. When the pains of hell gat more closely round about her, she forced her lips into a photographic smile, thereby impressing the motherly Mrs. Bebro with a sense of her patience under tribulation. It was a gruesome comedy.

At first pure terror and avarice, bitter resentment of the wrongs Hugh had done her, and consequent blindness to the imminent peril in which he stood, had paralysed the moral sense. But later, after she had given evidence before the magistrates, she knew to the full that she was playing the most desperate game that ever woman played for money. The gambler's instinct kept her mind clear; strength of will saved her from collapse. Hugh acquitted, all her money would be her own. Everything would be well. She would seek fresh scenes, blot this nightmare for ever from her life. Hugh condemned, she would do some mad deed to save him, summon Anna Cassaba from Syria, cast herself at the feet of the Home Secretary, surrender her thousands, and—throw herself over Waterloo Bridge. This was a doom, inevitable, meted out to her, rather than a scheme which her brain had devised. All the passionate yet stubborn racial energies of her nature were concentrated upon the supreme effort of making her last bid for fortune.

Idols

It was a fixed idea, focussing the distempered mind and magnetising the exhausted flesh.

Her last bid for fortune. She had made it. She found herself in Mrs. Bebro's carriage, with the motherly lady by her side. How she had been transported thither from the swaying, reeling court, she did not know. Mrs. Bebro, with veil raised above red eyes, was holding her hand. Yet she had a vague knowledge that she had not fainted.

"There, there, it is over now, dear," said her companion, kindly. "It has been a trying time for you. We'll soon get home, now, and a cup of tea and a lie down will do you good."

"Yes," said Minna, hoarsely. "It will do me good."

"Poor young man," said Mrs. Bebro. "I nearly cried my eyes out over him."

"It is a terrible thing," said the girl, with set teeth, clenching the arm-strap with her free hand.

"And I'm sure he's innocent—poor fellow. I met him once—you remember? Such charming manners—like a prince. And your poor, dear father so fond of him too. He can't have done it."

"I know he is innocent," said Minna.

Hitherto Mrs. Bebro had been very considerate in her allusions to the dreadful topic. But now human nature asserted itself. She was anxious to sympathise, also to relieve pent-up emotions; for the fascina-

Idols

tion of a murder upon those intimately connected with it is intense—it is a splash of blood upon the grey veil of decorous life, and cannot be hidden. She took up her parable, discoursed at length, in a hushed voice, such as she considered reverend upon the Day of Atonement. And as she talked, in the cramped space of the noiselessly gliding brougham, the horrors gradually grew upon the girl.

“We must buy an evening paper to see what happened before we got there. But I asked the policeman, and he said things were going very bad for the poor fellow. When once I got in, I should have liked to have heard it all from the beginning. But it would have been too painful for you, poor dear child, to have done more than just given your evidence. I am glad you were able to say what you did about him. It may help him.”

“Yes, I tried to help him,” said Minna.

The sides of the brougham seemed to be narrowing upon her, like the Inquisition torture-chamber. She suddenly thrust out her arms to keep them off.

“My dear child——?”

The question suddenly restored her balance. But she wanted to scream. Instead, she uttered a short laugh.

“I was thinking what a screaming farce this would make in hell!” she said, gutturally.

Mrs. Bebro looked at her enquiringly. The conception was beyond her.

Idols

"Yes, I am sure the Evil One must have a hand in it," she said, at last, in a tone of assent. "Circumstances are diabolically against him. Oh, it gives me the horrors to think of it—and how proud and handsome he looked standing there—as if everyone was the dirt under his feet. Do you know, dear—about you and him—if he had been one of our people I could have fancied——"

She broke off. The carriage was blocked at Piccadilly Circus. A newspaper boy darted up to the open window, flourishing an evening paper.

"Sunnington murder! latest details!"

Minna threw herself aside onto Mrs. Bebro with a piercing shriek. There was a rush of startled and attracted bystanders. Mrs. Bebro stretched across Minna and pulled up the glass. The carriage moved on. She took the shaking girl in her arms and held her to her bosom, uttering motherly words of soothing.

But that sudden shriek was the beginning of things. All the rest of the drive home she lay quite still, continuing the comedy and the mystification of the worthy, single-minded woman; but in order to do so, she was forced to keep her gloved fingers between her teeth.

"There, there," continued Mrs. Bebro, petting her. "Don't take on so, dear. We must bear all the afflictions that the Lord sends us. Bear up, dear, under them, like a Jewish maiden. We will put you

Idols

to bed, with something hot and nice to take, and you will sleep and wake up strong to-morrow."

And so the good woman went on, seeking to heal the bayonnetted body with housewifely sticking-plaster.

But the girl was too far gone for heeding. The new horrors were upon her. As soon as they reached the house and had entered, she fled upstairs to her room, with the black things at her heels.

What passed then, when alone in her room she crouched before her terror, it is neither profitable nor decent to say. She had been strong up to a certain point—the goal to whose attainment she had set the marvellous mechanism of nerves and fibres. It was of her sex not to have calculated upon the beyond. She paid her sex's penalty. The inevitable law of inconsistency dragged her out, a wild, half-mad thing, an hour later into the street. A hansom cab chanced to have just put down a fare at the next house. She entered, flung an address at the driver, and a moment later was being carried through whirling space.

The first day of Hugh's trial was over. The streets rang with it. Reports were flashing through the kingdom on a thousand wires. It was the theme of all men's talk. A *cause célèbre* convulsing a vast society. The attorney-general had delivered his opening address. One or two witnesses had been called; Minna Hart the last. The prisoner's prospects were

Idols

damnably black. His friends regarded each other with pale lips. In the quiet Hertfordshire townlet two gentle ladies clung together in awful anguish of soul. The man himself lay in Holloway Gaol mailed in a pride of steel.

Irene and Gerard sat over their evening meal. She had been in court all the gnawing day, and now, leaning back in her chair, dressed in a pink wrapper, a pretty coquetry of happier times, she looked almost diaphanous in her exhaustion.

"It is no use your not eating," said Gerard; "you'll make yourself ill."

She shook her head.

"I can't, Gerard. I'll have some beef tea or something presently. You go on. You are a man and have a big body to nourish."

She helped him from the dish in front of her, choosing, in her wifely fashion, the nicest-looking morsels, and then sat regarding him with her great eyes, admiring the strength of will that could compel appetite on so sorrowful an evening. She knew that rejection of food was silly. But the thought of it turned her sick.

"I feel ill," she said. "I always prided myself on being strong-minded and above affected, feminine weaknesses. But now—" she shrugged her shoulders and her lips moved in a wan smile.

"You had better not come to the court to-morrow, if you don't feel up to it," said Gerard.

Idols

"Oh, I should go if I were dying!" said Irene. "It is the least thing we can do—go and cheer and keep the brave heart in him. For with all your efforts, dearest, you have been able to do nothing."

"There was nothing to be done. I did what I could. Couldn't even get hold of your famous photograph. He must have destroyed that too. So I couldn't trace the original."

That cold, cruel and exquisitely chiselled face, whose likeness she had seen in Hugh's rooms, had persistently assumed the identity of the woman for whose sake he was maintaining this silence. Even when she doubted the probability of her conjecture, the mysterious woman gradually revealed herself as the possessor of those ophidian eyes. They haunted her night and day. At last she doubted no longer. That was the woman; she had the face of one who could well see the man that loved her die before her eyes. As a forlorn hope Irene had set Gerard upon the track of this photograph. But it had disappeared from Hugh's rooms. The disappearance, however, confirmed her certainty.

There was a silence. Gerard went on with his dinner with the steadiness of a big-framed man who must eat. Irene pressed her hands over her burning eyeballs and leant forward on the table. She was suffering greatly.

Idols

"Will you be able to bear it—if the worst comes?" she asked, after a while.

"The worst hasn't come yet," he replied, "so it's no good talking about it."

His brow clouded. There was a deep note in his wife's voice that troubled him. She noticed the shadow.

"I must not pain you, Gerard. I have only known Hugh for a few years. He has been your friend all your life. I can't feel it all as you do."

"We don't mend matters by dwelling upon them," he said. "Besides—if there really is a woman——"

"Oh, she must be in hell-fire now!" exclaimed Irene, fiercely—"a foretaste of the future."

"Yes," he assented grimly, "I shouldn't like to be in her shoes."

Another silence. This time broken by the rattle and sudden drag of a carriage drawing up at the front door. A moment later the faint whirr of the electric bell downstairs.

"Who can that be?" cried Irene, nervously. "Hush, dear! Let me listen."

She strained her ears, rather overwrought. "It is a woman—if it should be *the* woman!"

"Oh, nonsense, Renie," said Gerard, with a man's contempt for the feminine-fanciful.

The maidservant entered.

"Miss Hart, sir, wishes to speak to you."

Idols

"Miss Hart!" echoed Irene, with a shade of disappointment. Then succeeded quick scorn for the silliness of her fluttering hope, and natural interest in the visitor's errand. "What can she want?"

Gerard rose from the table and went out into the hall. It was a broad passage, softly carpeted, well warmed, furnished with oak settles and tables, here and there a great indoor plant, all brightly lighted from a great central cluster of electric globes.

Minna was standing near the door. As Gerard approached, she advanced hurriedly to meet him—her veil off, her dark hair disordered over her forehead, her fashionable, befeathered and beribboned hat awry.

"I have come—I want to——"

She stopped dead. Stared at him open-mouthed. He was somewhat bewildered.

"Yes?" he said, in lame enquiry.

But she stood before him, trembling, uttering little sharp noises, like a terrier wistful to make his wants known, a horror in her eyes.

"Good God—what is the matter?"

She could not reply. The horror faded into mere helpless fright. She raised her hands and twitched her fingers, somewhat horridly, in the air, and continued the little staccato moans.

"Renie!" cried Gerard, sharply. "Renie, come here!"

Irene started at her husband's summons and ran out

Idols

into the hall. But as soon as the girl saw her, she uttered a long, shivering moan and shrank against the wall.

“What is it?”

“The girl’s got a fit—hysterics or something. Said a couple of words and then gasped at me.”

“Poor child,” said Irene, touched.

She approached her, but Minna waved her away with unreasoning terror, and, edging backward, met an oak settle on which she instinctively sat, and, crouching, continued her inarticulate cries.

“She evidently doesn’t want you, Renie,” said Gerard. “What the devil shall I do with her?”

“I’ll go away for a minute—you must try and quiet her. I’ll send Jane to you. Then I’ll come back and see if she’ll bear me to touch her. It’s hysteria. The whole thing has been too much for her to-day—poor little thing.”

Irene made one more attempt; but seeing that her ministrations would perhaps render the girl violent, she retired and sent the maid in her place. Irene gone, Minna grew less excited, but she trembled and moaned and was apparently incapable of understanding words. Gerard arranged some cushions, and the servant administered smelling-salts. On trying to pull off her gloves, so as to chafe her hands, they found the fingers of one hand swollen. The kid was cut, and bloody at the edges, where she had bitten. Gerard

Idols

left the two women, and, going into the dining-room, explained matters hurriedly to Irene.

"What the deuce is the meaning of it?"

"She's overwrought, poor child. Think what a terrible ordeal she went through in the witness-box to-day. Hugh was very friendly at The Lindens, you know."

"Do you think she was in love with Hugh?"

"Perhaps," said Irene, rather wearily.

"But what did she want me for?"

"All hysterical, dear. She knew you were Hugh's dearest friend. Came to ask whether you thought him likely to be condemned. Then broke down. You see what poor silly stuff we women are made of."

"At any rate, you don't fall to gibbering like a monkey at the sight of a snake," said Gerard, accepting his wife's explanation. "And now, what are we to do with her?"

"She won't let me come near her, or else I would nurse her," said Irene. "What do you think?"

"Her cab is still waiting. I could take her home to her friends. Would it hurt her?"

"No," said Irene. "It might do her good—the drive; but you—you are so tired, dear."

"Oh, Lord, I'd sooner take her away than have her fooling about here," said Gerard. And he went back again to the hall.

Thus Minna was restored to the scared and anxious

Idols

Bebros, who put her to bed and sent for a doctor. The hysteria, on whose brink she had long been trembling, had at last engulfed her, and hour by hour she sank deeper into the abyss, where all the horrors fought for her. But the significance of her foiled errand did not reach her consciousness.

And that night, as Gerard slept stertorously by her side, Irene lay throbbingly awake, aching with suspense. The awful peril of the man whom Gerard loved dulled her reminiscence of the strange visit of the hysterical girl. It never crossed her mind that the Lord had delivered her enemy into her hands.

CHAPTER XIII

IT was the second day of the trial. Irene held her husband's hand in a nervous grasp. They were sitting together among a crowd of well-dressed men and women, many of them friends of Hugh, in the reserved places on the judge's bench. Yesterday, in her unfamiliarity with the historic court of the Old Bailey, its first aspect had shocked her sense of the fitness of things. She had vaguely imagined a vast hall, stately and imposing paraphernalia, all the pomp and circumstance of the law. But this dingy, murky, uncomfortable chamber, furnished with just the bare necessities for procedure, and crammed with perspiring men, seemed more like a third-rate auction-room than the most solemn court of justice in the land. It was mean and cramped; even God's light cut off from it by the eternal, blighting shadow of Newgate. Instead of spacious galleries she had seen little yellow boxes by the roof, above the dock, surmounted by vague agglutinated masses of faces. The nearness of everything to her, consequent upon the small area and great depth of the court, had affected her with a strange feeling of oppression.

Idols

To-day the surprise had passed; the scene had grown so intensely familiar that she seemed to have borne its burden about her for years, but the feeling of oppression still remained. The nameless atmosphere of the gaol, sullen and hopeless and tainted, hung pall-like over everything.

The well of the court was crowded. At narrow tables sat the rows of barristers in wig and gown; behind them, on the short slope abruptly terminating at the whitewashed wall, the pressmen, behind whom again more barristers and members of the public, all standing in an insignificant but suffocatingly packed crowd. Below her, Irene saw the bobbing wig of the clerk of arraigns and the bald head of Harroway at the solicitors' table. Beyond, in the front row of the lines of counsel, stood the attorney-general examining the witness; on her right the judge, broad-wigged, red-robed, scratching loud with quill-pen; Lord Mayor and Aldermen in civic robes, with their cynical nosegays of flowers in front of them; on her right, beneath the dim closed window, the pallid Jew butler in the witness-box. Opposite, the jury, twelve commonplace, but hard and practical-looking men, as London juries generally are. And next, the vast square dock, glass-panelled, grim, overlooked by the inexorable clock face, which has marked the last hours of life's chances for so many tortured men and women; and in the dock, guarded by the warder,

Idols

the erect and somewhat haughty figure of the prisoner.

On Irene's arrival in court this morning, Harroway had handed her a little pencilled note from Hugh.

"Bless you, dear Renie, for coming to cheer and strengthen me. Before, it was best for me to fight it out alone. But now the sight of you gladdens me. I am doing everything for what I consider the best. Don't fret. Gardiner will pull me through."

And when he had entered the dock, his eyes had travelled to hers with swift instinct, and for many seconds remained fixed. Whatever possibilities of guilt may have lingered in her mind, were swept away in that mutual gaze. She saw his innocence deep in her soul, and her heart yearned towards him. She knew now, past all doubt, that he was risking his life to save some wretched woman's honour. The woman's dastardly silence was all but inconceivable, but the man's chivalry blazed before the world. Her eyes had glistened with a moment's exultation. Here was a man of unfaltering strength, a friend to be thrillingly proud of, to die for, gladly, if need were. He became a hero, worthy of the devotion of others. The heroic chord in her nature had been struck, and its inarticulate music had sung in her heart. She had murmured her emotion to Gerard, but before he could reply, the entrance of the judge and the rising of the court had broken the momentary spell. Her anxiety had re-

Idols

turned with a sickening rush, and Hugh became once more, as all through the aching hours of yesterday, the dear friend exposed to public degradation and to deadly peril.

The examination of Samuels continued. He described the finding of the body, the attitude in which it lay, the position of the heavy poker with which, according to the theory of the prosecution, the murderous blow was struck—all the harrowing details that had been so often laid before the law. In a faltering voice he narrated the history of the evening: the merry dinner-party, the sound of the lively music upstairs (Minna's mad tarantella), the angry words he had overheard on coming into his master's study, the permission to go to bed, his last sight of the prisoner at ten minutes past eleven, his after meeting with Mr. Hart in the bedroom at five minutes to twelve, when the latter had taken the ledger from his bedroom safe and gone downstairs again. Familiar as all these facts were to Irene, every fresh statement put them in a still more terrible light. They seemed to leave Hugh no single avenue for escape. He was hedged round by a pitiless fence of incontrovertible testimony. Once Hugh looked swiftly from the window to her and then back again. The glance appealed to her like that of a noble animal caught in a trap.

Yet he bore the ordeal bravely, twirling now and then a disdainful moustache. It was the man's nature

Idols

to carry his burdens defiantly. Minna's appearance in the witness-box the day before had lashed him to a fury of pride. He would rather die a thousand deaths than use her contaminated soul to save his life.

At times he looked round the familiar precincts with a smile almost of mockery. The topsy-turvydom of his position contained elements of the grotesque. The central sphere of his life's ambitions, by some wizard touch, had become the theatre of his shame. The judge before whom he had most often pleaded was now trying him as a murderer. The brother barristers below were cordial acquaintances, linked to him by the honourable traditions of a beloved profession. The scene shimmered before his eyes in whimsical unreality. But then, suddenly, a blaze of associations would disclose, by lurid contrast, the pathos of his ruin. It was terribly real. Once a lump rose in his throat, and he steadied himself by the hand-rail. On the last occasion of his presence in this place, he had delivered an impassioned harangue on behalf of a poor trembling devil of an embezzling clerk, who had clutched at that same hand-rail for support. He remembered how he had wondered at the craven spirit that could thus make public exhibition of its terror. The memory was a whip to his pride.

The butler's evidence was black against him. What saving admission could Gardiner, his counsel, ablest cross-examiner of the day though he was, get

Idols

out of this man? Wearily he glanced at the window, dwelling with a shiver on the grey, gaunt walls of Newgate—the last abode of the condemned man's brief span of life, hiding the condemned cell and the gallows—and on the irony of the doves of Newgate courtyard that flashed their white wings in the over-shadowed air. It was then that he turned the quick glance at Irene which she intercepted and interpreted as one of appeal. Gardiner rose to cross-examine the butler. There was little hope of shaking the evidence.

"Oh, God! How my heart aches!" said Irene to Gerard, pressing her hand to her bosom.

"Hush!" he replied. "Don't give way. Let us follow this closely."

But the meshes seemed tighter drawn than ever around Hugh. Her nerve began to fail. Outside the bright spring sunshine flooded the sky. Not a ray entered the murky court, where the heat was oppressive, the air stifling. The judge, notorious for his horror of draughts, had caused all the windows to be closed. Irene gasped for breath. A faint nausea made her head swim. She closed her eyes and leaned against her husband. For a few moments she lost consciousness. Gerard, intent upon the evidence, remained unaware of her condition.

Suddenly a confused murmur of voices aroused her with a start. Samuels was leaving the witness-box.

Idols

Gardiner was regarding Hugh with a little air of triumph. The mass of wigged heads below her was agitated like the backs of a flock in motion.

"What's the matter? I wasn't listening?" she whispered.

Gerard, not catching her words, concluded they contained merely some expression of emotion, and nodded to her vaguely. Soon absorbed in the evidence of the next witness, Parsons, the porter at the mansion, Irene let her question pass and forgot the incident.

Thus a material point for Hugh's defence, an admission by Samuels that he had heard a noise like the slamming of the front door at half-past eleven, the hour when Hugh claimed to have left the house, had escaped her cognisance.

The only point in his client's favour that Gardiner elicited from the porter, was the statement that the brown paper parcel which the prisoner was carrying on the morning of the murder was neatly tied with string, and in no wise resembled a hastily wrapped up bundle of documents.

Other witnesses followed. Again Irene felt the deadly faintness coming over her. It was nature's penalty for insufficient food, sleep and air. She struggled against it with all her strength.

"Shall I take you out?" asked Gerard, noticing her pallor.

Idols

She shook her head. She would sit through it to the end. Never had she felt such fierce contempt for her sex's weakness as then. It was maddening to feel her nerve yielding and her brain growing dizzy. Was she going to follow the example of the shallow, hysterical girl of last night? Were all women constituted alike—to snap like lath at the first serious strain? The thought was abhorrent. For over an hour she sat there scarcely heeding the proceedings, her whole mind concentrated upon the efforts to retain her consciousness. And during this hour Mrs. Parsons had stated that she had found among the prisoner's linen a sleeping suit which had been missing for some time, and Israel Hart's confidential clerk had sworn to the valueless nature of the £5,000 security.

The endless cross-fire of question and answer drew to a conclusion. The charge was read, and the counsel for the prosecution submitted his case to the judge.

Gardiner rose. Irene with a great effort regained her self-control, and regarded him anxiously.

"I call no witnesses for the defence, my lord," said he.

Irene, aghast, uttered a sharp cry of pain and dismay. To her mind, unversed in legal methods, this proceeding seemed like capitulation. Was Gardiner going to make no show of fight for his friend's life? She questioned her husband in a fever of anxiety.

"He is relying on his speech to-morrow to devalu-

Idols

ate the evidence. What witnesses can he bring forward? ”

But Irene was not reassured. She lay back, with white lips and panting bosom. The halter was already round Hugh's neck. To her strained eyes his features seemed to have undergone an awful change since the morning. Her vision invested him with imaginary haggardness and deathlike pallor. Again she felt faint and closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, the attorney-general was addressing the jury. Now he had more scope for emotion than in his opening. He spoke of the prisoner's position as a barrister, of the terrible pain it had been to him to lead this prosecution. (All the unreasoning feminine in Irene blazed into inward reproach. It was hypocrisy, baseness, a hireling's part. No noble or generous nature could have undertaken the task.) He spoke of duty, of the law, of the necessity of sacrificing private feelings to the interests of justice. And justice compelled him to point out the prisoner as a man guilty of a terrible crime. He proceeded to the evidence, recapitulated the details. Constructed a romance of evil passions. Drew a picture of the imaginary scene, the quarrel over the £5,000, the insulting word, the dastardly and fatal blow.

Hugh, leaning over the railing of the dock, gazed at him intently, with set teeth. Throughout all the

Idols

sordid commonplaces of the trial, he had maintained his bearing of scorn. But now the touch of a lurid eloquence gripped his nature. His breath came hard and fast, in speechless indignation and horror at the vivid fable.

The crowded court was deathly still. Irene gripped her husband's hand, looking now at the denunciatory attitudes of the speaker, now at the intense steel of the denounced man's eyes, now at the set faces of the jury as they sat under the spell of the fierce oratory.

"Gerard—they will kill him. I see condemnation in their eyes," she whispered, hoarsely.

"Damn them," he answered, carried away by the excitement, "I believe they will."

"Can nothing human save him?"

"I would give ten years of my life."

She tightened her clasp on his great hand by way of sympathy and acknowledgment. A little sound of sobbing was heard. It came from a lady next but one to Irene—Mrs. Gardiner—the wife of Hugh's counsel and friend. Irene was dry-eyed. Suddenly she felt strong, with her young blood thrilling through her veins. Again she whispered.

"Gerard—would you give all you held most dear in the world?"

"Of course," he replied.

The sonorous voice went on.

"The defence have called no witnesses. There

Idols

are none to call. Let them prove that the prisoner was elsewhere between eleven o'clock and seven on that fatal night—even between one and five, the limits set by the medical evidence—and the case falls to the ground. But they cannot do so. It has been hinted that a woman's honour is in question. That will be urged in his defence. But does the woman live who is so vile, so despicable as to let her reputation stand in the way of saving an innocent man from the most shameful of deaths? It is unthinkable. Human nature does not sink to such degradation of cowardice. When that blow was struck the prisoner was in no woman's arms."

He paused to take breath. There was just a flash of silence. And then a woman's voice broke out into a hoarse cry, as if the words tore their way through a gasping throat.

"He was. In mine!"

Another silence; this time longer; one of dumb bewilderment. Every eye was straining at the tall, quivering woman who stood with burning eyes and parted lips, throwing down her defiance. Then swift reaction swept through the assembly. The sudden, emotional, tragic, in a time of strain, brings elemental, inarticulate sounds from men's hearts. Confusion of voices reigned. Some broke into silly laughter. Gardiner leapt to his feet, quivering like a race-horse, gesticulating with his hands, uttering idle words of

Idols

appeal that were lost in the clamour. Gerard Merriam too was standing, had seized his wife's arm.

"Have you gone mad?" he shouted, hoarsely.

He wrenched her down to her seat. She shook off his grasp and sprang up again, facing the court. Before her will, his gave way. He sat and gnawed at his fingers in a frenzy of agitation.

The first amazement had held Hugh speechless. For a moment he stared at her stupidly. Then amid the hubbub he burst into passionate cries of denial. He would have leaped from the dock, had not iron arms encircled him and rough voices in his ear commanded silence. He obeyed, his heart thumping like a piston-rod. Then Gardiner and Harroway met by the side of the dock. Hugh leaned over the rail, at once engaged in excited discussion.

"You are mad!" cried Gardiner, at last, in his ear. "I shall save your life and you can shoot me afterwards if you like."

The solicitor and himself returned to their places. The judge thundered for order. The hubbub waned to a murmur. He threatened to clear the court. A scuffle near the door drew general attention to the fact of an ejection. Peace was restored. Men wiped streaming foreheads and looked about with eager eyes.

Gardiner, with wig awry, had the first word.

"My lord, I beg permission to call that lady as a witness."

Idols

"I protest, my lord!" cried Hugh in torture of soul. "Her tale is a lie. I will not have her commit perjury for my sake."

The judge rebuked him. The management of the case was in the hands of counsel. They only could be heard.

"But for God's sake, my lord?" cried Hugh again.

Sternly the judge threatened forcible measures. Hugh cast a wild, despairing glance around the hushed and wondering court, threw up his hands in a passionate gesture of appeal to Irene, who stood transfigured before him, and then with a groan sank into his chair and buried his face in his arms. He was powerless.

The prisoner being effectually silenced, the judge bent his heavy brows upon Irene.

"Will you repeat that statement on oath?"

She nodded her head thrice in affirmation before she could articulate the "yes."

There was a consultation between the judge and the attorney-general. The latter had no objection to the request of the defence. Irene stepped into the witness-box. She took the oath, shivered, and shot a swift glance of appeal at her husband. He sat glaring at her like a man stupefied, his eyes crossed in a kind of glazed squint, his body bent forwards, still biting at his fingers.

The self-accusing cry had sprung from resistless

Idols

impulse. The heroic instinct, awakened earlier, had been clamouring in the darkness. It rose to the lightning flash of suggestion. Hugh was doomed. Here was a splendid rescue. It had been a moment of tumultuous rapture. Simultaneously had come the conviction of Gerard's acquiescence, his equal gladness to sacrifice his honour for his friend's life. Had not Hugh once faced death for Gerard? Had not Gerard just said that he would give all he held most dear in the world to save him? It had been an exquisite moment of faith, during which the world had grown young again and radiant deeds were the commonplaces of life. All had crowded, in the instant, upon her mind. And the words had gone from her, she scarce knew how. They had sounded strange in her ears. But the silence, the cold, dispassionate accents of the judge brought to the surface her instincts as a nineteenth-century woman, cultivated under a thousand complex conditions. She realised the gravity of the step she was taking. All her faintness had gone under the magic of her inspiration, but the great and sudden effort to concentrate her intellectual powers checked the thrill in her veins. To be heroic in cold blood is the highest grade. She answered calmly. Her questioner was less collected than herself.

Only a woman could have committed the splendid perjury. Under examination she told with faultless precision the story of the fabulous adultery; the pris-

Idols

oner's Orestian friendship with her husband; his love for her before her marriage; the later and guilty passion on her own side; the rare chance of that fatal night when her husband was in Edinburgh. Solemnly she swore that the prisoner arrived at her house at a quarter to twelve and stayed there until the morning, leaving just before the servants were astir. Her manner gave the story the seal of truth.

The attorney-general cross-examined. In no particular could he shake her statement. Why had she not come forward before? She urged the scandal, the pain to her husband, the overmastering hope, grown to conviction, that the evidence against the prisoner was too slight to harm him.

"How did he enter your house?"

"He had a latch-key always in his possession."

"Was this the first time it had been used for this purpose?"

She set her teeth and answered, "No." Gardiner re-examined. No third party was aware of the existence of this liaison. The utmost precaution and secrecy had been maintained. Was her husband in court? Yes. She went down the steps and back to her place like one in a dream. Gerard remained motionless by her side, as if unconscious of her presence.

Gardiner, wishing to have corroborative evidence, sought permission to call Merriam. The latter assented, went into the witness-box. Irene's heart

Idols

fluttered faintly with happiness. Gerard had accepted the sacrifice. He would play his part as she had done hers. Yet his face was clouded and heavy and he answered doggedly, with the air of a man who has formed a resolve in the caverns of his soul.

He was absent in Edinburgh on the night in question. For some time past he had been uneasy as regards his wife's relations with Colman. The revelation was not an absolute surprise to him. Colman had been, for many years, almost a member of his household. By virtue of the intimacy he possessed a latch-key. No further questions were put. The opposite side declined to cross-examine. Gerard, looking neither to right nor left, walked out of the court.

Irene was left alone. She could not understand Gerard's neglect. Surely he meant her to follow. She rose and took a sweeping survey of the scenc. Counsel were whispering eagerly. The jury crowded together in animated discussion, the front row leaning over the backs of the seats. Many eyes were fixed admiringly upon herself. The judge, seen in obscured profile, was turning over his notes. The air still seemed impregnated with the odour of the gaol. Hugh sat in the dock, his face still buried in his arms, in an attitude of supreme dejection. And behind him stood his blue-habited imperturbable guards. Then, with bowed head, she hurried across the court, leaving by the door through which Gerard had disappeared.

Idols

He was not outside, in the witnesses' lobby, waiting for her as she had expected. She enquired of the policeman on duty. He had seen him pass, pointed out the way he had gone. She followed his directions, found herself in the courtyard. Gerard was nowhere to be seen. She hung about for a while, went outside and walked up and down the hurrying pavement, waited again by the entrance. But no Gerard. Disappointed and anxious, she retraced her steps, up worn bleak stairs, through gloomy corridors, and finally lost herself completely. But she hurried on with downcast eyes. At last she arrived at an entrance guarded by a policeman. It was not the door with which she was familiar. A sudden failing seized her. She could not return to her seat and present herself alone before the gaze of all those men. The valiantest of women has small feminine cowardices, which she does not seek to overcome. To leave the precincts was equally impossible. She resolved to wait, and walked bravely up and down the lobby. A few patient figures of men and women were sitting by the wall. Scarcely speculating who these might be, she sat down finally by an old man, poorly clad, who was leaning forward, his chin supported on his hands, regarding the pavement with lack-lustre eyes. Then for the first time she was able to think with some coherence of the stupendous nature of the deed she had just committed. She put her ungloved hands

Idols

over her burning eyes as if to shut out the scene that had blazed before them a few moments ago. The words of the counsel, her own replies, reverberated distinct in her ears. She would have given a year of her life for Gerard's protecting presence.

So absorbed was she that she did not hear a rough voice call out a strange name, nor notice the old man by her side rise in weary obedience to the summons. When, later, she withdrew her hands from her face, she did not heed his absence. Now and then a barrister or a document-laden clerk hurried past her. She waited in a torture of anxiety. At last the policeman approached and asked her if she was a witness in this case. Her reply gave him a clue to her interest. He smiled indulgently. This was the witnesses' lobby of the Recorder's Court. The Sunnington case was being tried in the chief court, before the judge; just the other end of the Old Bailey. Irene stamped her foot with vexation. Suspense had made her lose count of time. It seemed as if she had been absent for hours. What had happened? She must know. And here she had been waiting, like a fool, in a wrong part of the building.

"Direct me to the door the prisoner will come out by."

The policeman was still indulgent.

"If he's sentenced or the case is adjourned, he'll go down the dock and you won't see him. If he gets off he may leave by the main exit."

Idols

"That's what I want," said Irene.

He gave her the necessary directions. She hurried away, half running. At last she had perceived the cause of her error. The chief court was only up one flight of stairs, and she had passed it by in her agitation. The door and its guardian appeared in sight. But at that moment it was thrown open and a stream of men issued forth. The recognition of her was a signal for wild cheering and a rush towards her. She turned to fly. Someone overtook her, grasped her arm. It was a young barrister, an acquaintance.

"Let me take you out quietly. You will be mobbed by well-meaning enthusiasts."

The news that she was in front had spread. There was a tumult of cheers behind her. She pressed on with her guide. Her brain reeled. She dared scarcely ask the reason of the demonstration. In this first moment of confusion, it was merely significant of her own popularity. The thought was burning fire. A few steps brought them into the counsels' and solicitors' lobby, at the end of which was quiet. The young man looked at her glowingly.

"Thank God! They might have hanged an innocent man."

She stared at him only half comprehending.

"Yes. Don't you know? Of course—he is acquitted—your evidence——"

The young fellow stopped short, blushed—he was

Idols

a fair youth and his white wig made him fairer—realising the delicate ground.

“Yes—my evidence?” replied Irene, pausing.
“I have been away from the court.”

“It knocked the prosecution all of a heap. Hanna threw up the case. The judge directed a formal verdict. Thank God!”

“Then he is free!”

She staggered under the realisation, leaned for a moment against the wall. From a little distance off came the noise of voices and footsteps of people leaving the court. Twos and threes of barristers passed by and eyed her curiously.

“Let me put you into a cab,” said the young man.

“Thank you—yes,” she faltered.

Taking his arm, faint and dizzy and half-closing her eyes, she allowed him to lead her by a staircase unused by the public, to the street. As she entered the cab a few persons recognised her, and set up a cheer and waved their hats. The cab drove off. The ceaseless, roaring traffic of Holborn seemed the phantasmagoria of a strange world.

CHAPTER XIV

HEARTSICK with longing for Gerard, she opened her front door. A maidservant met her in the hall.

"Has your master come home?"

"He has been in and gone out again, ma'am. He told me to let you have this note when you arrived."

She handed her mistress the brass letter-tray where it was lying. Irene tore open the envelope with shaking fingers. It contained a hasty line scribbled in pencil.

"I am going away for the night. Will see you in the morning. G. M."

She staggered as if he had struck her. What did it mean? It was difficult enough to grasp the fact; to pierce to the underlying motive was beyond her powers. A nameless fear assailed her. How could she live alone through all the hours until to-morrow morning? She stared at the words until they danced before her eyes. The fact was plain. In this hour of her most awful need of him, he had gone from her side. Her dismay was child-like in its piteousness.

Idols

"Did your master take any luggage with him?" she asked, steadying her voice.

"Just his dressing-bag," replied the maid; then breaking through the restraint she had imposed upon herself: "And, oh, ma'am!—Mr. Colman——?"

"He is acquitted, Jane," said Irene.

The maid burst into tears, after the manner of her class. Suspense had been great in the kitchen, where Hugh Colman had been invested with mythical excellences. The cook, upon whom he had never set eyes, had been weeping intermittently all day long. *A fortiori*, the naturalness of the emotions of the parlour-maid who had waited upon him at table and helped him on with his overcoat. It is odd how readily domestic servants receive the impression of a guest's personality and how genuinely their sympathy or antipathy may be aroused. Perhaps, like silly women, they viewed Hugh in too heroic a light—but, nevertheless, the girl's outburst was sincere. Irene, touched for the moment, forgot her anxiety. But it returned swiftly as soon as she was alone. She twisted the paper nervously in her hands, sat down upon one of the oak settles and tried to reason away the fear. Presently she rose and went upstairs to her room. She was desperately tired. She unpinned her veil, made a weary pretence of rolling it up, and then sank down helpless on the edge of the bed, her hands in her lap.

Idols

In this relaxed moral condition a woman cries softly, if a sympathetic arm, man's or woman's, is put around her. When she is alone, however, crying seems futile and undignified; she arises soon afterwards, as Irene did, and mechanically changes her dress for a comfortable wrapper, freshens her face with the trivial comfort of a powder-puff's softness, tidies her hair, with dull, half-observant glances in her mirror, puts *eau de cologne* upon a clean handkerchief and wearily hangs up her discarded garments. The lighter feminine instincts float like straws upon the surface, beneath which other things have sunk for very heaviness.

After this she went downstairs to the smoking-room, whither Jane brought her an egg beaten up in brandy. The girl hung about, eager for a word of detail concerning the trial. The expectation was pathetic, considering its impossibility of fulfillment. Irene dismissed her gently, and took the stimulant, of which she stood in great need. And then she thought, hard and anxiously.

A dreadful sense of loneliness crept over her, even more intense than that which she had once felt before, when she had gone on board the steamer at Bombay, journeying from one grave to another. It seemed impossible that Gerard should not be returning. She had never craved him so much as in this hour of crisis. Again she read the now crumpled sheet containing his

Idols

curt message. Her blind faith in his acquiescence in the sacrifice was rudely shaken. He had gone from her in a passion of anger. There was no other solution. She felt sick with doubt and dread. Her eyes wandered round the room, trying to derive assurance of his return from the familiar, external signs of his occupancy. His fishing-rods stood in a corner in their neat canvas cases. His cartridge-belt hung festooned beneath a hunting-trophy on the wall, surmounted by a fox's mask. Opposite, by the mantelpiece, stretched his overflowing pipe-rack. On a little table by the side of the great armchair, whose well-worn seat showed the impress of his huge limbs, still remained his pipe of the morning, with the ashes half fallen out. His slippers lay beneath the chair. Irene looked at them pathetically, and again felt the very miserable desire to cry. The trivial generally tends the flood-gates of tears. In the horrors of a siege women who have viewed, brave-eyed, men butchered before their faces, have been known to break down at the sight of a wrecked canary-cage.

Presently Jane came in with a letter. A commissionaire had brought it and was waiting in the hall for an answer. Irene took it from the girl's hand with a quick heart-throb. From Gerard, doubtless explanatory—perhaps utterly reassuring. But as soon as her eyes fell upon the envelope she recognised Hugh's writing, and felt miserably disappointed. The

Idols

letter was addressed to "Mr. and Mrs. Merriam."
It ran:

"DEAREST ONES—The terrible price you have paid for my life makes me shrink from crossing your threshold unbidden. For such a deed it is idle to talk of gratitude. Send for me and I shall come. But God knows what I can say to you both. HUGH."

She sat for a few moments staring before her. Jane stood by respectful and dutiful, holding the brass salver by her side. Suddenly Irene rose, and, standing at her writing-table, dashed off a hasty line. They would have paid the price fifty times over for his sake. She would send for him soon, but to-night she was exhausted. He must be bright and happy. The bond between the three was only firmer and dearer. The maid took the note to the waiting messenger and Irene sank again into her chair by the fire.

She felt unspeakably grateful to Hugh for writing. How could she have received him? How explained Gerard's absence? The thought of a meeting was a burning fire in cheeks and bosom. Fortunately it was avoided. She thanked the tact that always underlay and checked Hugh's impulses. Another man, equally generous, would have rushed to throw himself at her feet.

The evening wore on. She sat down alone to the inevitable dinner and forced herself to eat. Once she

Idols

caught Jane looking at her curiously. The details of the great trial's sensational finish had reached Sunnington and were the theme of the servants' hall. She read amused speculation and virtuous approbation, subtly mingled, in the girl's glance. She flushed miserably, in spite of effort, and her throat contracted at the morsel she was about to swallow. Perhaps her servants would give her notice. The ironical pettiness of the thought faintly amused her and restored self-composure. The meal over, she returned to the smoking-room fire and nursed her heart-ache till bedtime.

Hugh's letter, often re-read, awakened a desire for his companionship, vague and scarcely formulated as an idea. Yet she would have shrunk in strange terror at his approach. Womanlike, she longed for a tender word or gentle touch, and strove to materialise it out of Hugh's letter. And she was conscious of a little disappointment, so little that she would not admit it to her reason, in the joint address. Her reason admired the delicacy with which Hugh had conveyed his appreciation of their combined purpose, but her woman's instinct felt the individual lack. Ever so subtle an acknowledgment of her separate action would have been balm to the bruised spirit.

She slept fitfully, was up betimes, disregarding a racking headache. Gerard would come. She would have speech with him, learn the unimagined worst.

Idols

No letter from him. Her pile of correspondence, envelopes briefly surveyed, remained unopened. She had not the heart to read letters. All her throbbing thoughts were Gerard's. He was deeply angered. She would humble herself. Yet human certainty had never been so radiantly absolute as hers had been in the oneness of their sacrifice, when she had offered up his honour and her virtue. She could come to no conclusion.

- For an hour she stood at the dining-room window, which looked upon the little circular drive in front of the house, watching for her husband's arrival. Her every fibre yearned and dreaded. At last he appeared, swung open the gate and strode in with a quick glance at the pale face behind the window. Irene's hand flew to her heart. She stepped back, pierced by the glance, and waited. In another moment Gerard was in the room. He clapped his hat on the table and advanced a pace or two, fixing her with his shifty blue eyes.

"Now, let us have it out at once. What the devil have you got to say for yourself?"

The look, the tone, the insult dashed upon her like a douche of icy water upon an hysterical girl. She drew herself up, quivering, with a flash in her eyes.

"You are forgetting yourself, Gerard."

Yet an instant afterwards she softened and humbled herself as a woman does towards the man she has been

Idols

yearning for. She went to him with outstretched arms, pleading in her face.

"Forgive me, dear! Forgive me!"

He thrust her away, rather roughly.

"Don't make a scene. I hate it. That's why I stayed away, so as to put a cooling night in front of our interview. But I want an explanation, and I think I'm entitled to it."

Irene looked at him helplessly. She was on the high seas, rudderless.

"I thought you would willingly have given your life for Hugh," she said. "You were deeply moved—said there was nothing you would not give. The scheme flashed on me. I never doubted your assent—as God hears me, Gerard, I felt the certainty like an inspiration."

"Damned funny inspiration to fancy that I would tamely agree to your infidelities with another man."

"But didn't you understand?" she gasped.

"Perfectly. But I'm not the sort of man to share my wife with anybody—even with my dearest friend."

The world was rocking. Her senses swam. She lost heed of surroundings. Found herself saying in a silly way:

"But it was all a lie, Gerard. I thought you knew."

He looked at her for a moment or two and then thumped his fist on the dining-table. The shock upset

Idols

a little epergne of flowers and the water flooded the dark-red table-cover.

"And I say it wasn't a lie. There!"

"Gerard!"

The voice, pitched high, rang through the house. A cry of terror, incredulity, reproach. They remained looking at each other; he doggedly, unmoved, with slightly crossed eyes; she in blank anguish of amazement.

"I don't beat about the bush. I come straight to the point. You and Colman carried on behind my back. Do you suppose I was fool enough not to see it? I was only biding my time. It came sooner than I expected. A *coup de théâtre*. I thought something was wrong by the unnecessary state of excitement you have been in the last few weeks. It must have been exciting, with a vengeance! All I can say is, that I admire your pluck. How long has this been going on? Tell me."

"It was a mere invention—pure perjury—to save his life—your friend—my friend. What am I to say? Oh, my God, Gerard!" she burst out. "You are not in earnest—you are angry—saying this to try me, for some reason that I don't understand."

The thought of his belief in her sworn statement had never entered her mind during the most fear-racked moment. The fact dazed her. He shook his great shoulders impatiently.

Idols

"You had better give it up and answer my question."

"I have answered it—my whole life with you has answered it."

"It has," he sneered. "And more fool I for not having taken the answer before. And I tell you, I was getting pretty sick of it—the eternal Hugh, Hugh—damn him!—in every sentence you uttered—the everlasting sight of him in the house——"

"But I thought he was as dear to you as I was!" broke in Irene, aghast.

"It suited your purpose to think so. I never told you so. I'm sick of it—utterly sick of it. Sick of your flim-flammeries of philosophy and the higher life and noble work in the world and all that rot. And now I'm heartily glad it's over."

"Over?" she echoed, falteringly.

"Yes, over. I'm not going to play the injured husband. I'm going to be free; to do what I like and live as I like, and you can go off with your lover and help him to write his measly poetry. It has been choking me for years. I'm going to get free of it all."

Irene listened, stupefied. He seemed some unutterable stranger that had obtained access to her presence, she knew not how. He thrust his hands into his pockets and turned away. The gesture was familiar. Times out of number he had stood so, looming huge between herself and the light. It touched a tender

Idols

chord, brought back the Gerard she had known and worshipped. Again she flew to him, caught him by the lapels of his coat and broke into a loud cry.

"But Gerard—my husband—am I a woman capable of such a thing?"

He unloosened her hands and drew apart from her.

"All women are the same—Madonnas or Messalinas."

"Then Hugh——"

"I tell you I hate him," said Gerard, vindictively.

Then, suddenly, beneath his furious anger Irene saw the man as he was, and her idol lay shivered at her feet.

"Was that why you never told me of his having saved your life?"

Taken aback for the moment, he looked at her enquiringly.

"Because you hated him and were jealous of him all the time?"

"I told you my reasons. I haven't come now to discuss them."

He crossed the room and caught up his hat.

"I wish I had not come at all," he said, with a drop in his tone to sullenness. "I should have sent my solicitor. Your brazening it out made me lose my temper."

Irene interposed herself between him and the door.

"We can't part like this," she said in a queer

Idols

voice. "Tell me what your wishes are and I'll try to obey them."

Gerard reflected for a moment, checking a spiteful outburst. He had said his say. Further display of anger was futile. Also he knew something of Irene, and was aware that plain words would fall coldest upon her intelligence.

"After what has passed," he said, "I can't live in this house while you are here."

"I will leave it to-day," said Irene.

"Take your time. I don't want to inconvenience you more than I can help."

"You are very kind, Gerard," said Irene, in bitter irony.

"I will have everything that belongs to you despatched wherever you think fit," he continued, unheeding.

"And then?"

He shrugged his shoulders, looked at her askance for a second.

"Then I get my divorce."

Her mind, dazed by exhaustion and the pain and the successive cataclysms of this disastrous interview, had not travelled a second beyond the lurid present. The bald word was a new shock, the final sledgehammer blow that sent love reeling. She grew very white.

"You intend to—divorce—me?" she said, slowly.

Idols

"That is my intention," he replied, somewhat abashed before her staring eyes.

Irene shrank away from the door, and turned gropingly towards a couch against the wall. Gerard lingered for a moment on the threshold. Then he left her. She sank upon the couch shuddering and faint, looking helplessly at the upset flowers and the soaking pool of water upon the table-cover.

CHAPTER XV

AN aunt, with whom she had lived during the brief interval between her return from India and her marriage, granted her a temporary asylum.

"If you will do with me until I can find some place of my own," said Irene, "I shall be grateful."

"My house is always open to dear Robert's child," said Miss Beechcroft.

She was an austere woman of primitive views, to whom Irene had ever been a puzzle. As the heroine of this amazing scandal, her niece was a dark and inscrutable enigma. Its transcendency bewildered her. Having no moral foot-rule capable of measuring it, she did not attempt the obviously futile. She waived explanatory details. Her dead brother's only child craved shelter; she gave it willingly; her own companionship she withheld as much as possible, for a variety of reasons. Not the least was the gentleman's respect for the dignity of suffering.

The freedom from misdirected sympathy was a boon to Irene. She needed solitude. Her universe had crashed about her ears. At first she was dazed, stunned, scarce knowing where to turn amid the shape-

Idols

less wreckage. Few things could exemplify the cataclysm. Overwhelming proof coming to a Paul at the end of his life that there was no Christ, that his apostolate had been pure silliness, could not have brought him more face to face with chaos. It was too sudden for her to look within for contributing causes. Introspection comes later. At present she could only stare aghast at the ruins of her life, and proceed to shape for herself a temporary existence.

On the second day after the trial she found a measure of mental calmness. The past was irrevocable. Gerard's self-revelation was final. There was no Gerard, such as she had conceived him; her worship had been a futility. She was conscious that love was dead, killed outright by lightning. Further she could not go. Neither could she forecast the consequences of the threatened divorce. Reconstruction for the present was essential. The effort braced her strength. Nature came to her aid, pride armed her with steadfastness, the fire of suffering steeled her will. She could humble herself no more to Gerard to sue for mercy. In everything henceforward the initiative would lie with him. She throned herself on snow-capped heights.

Yet from time to time her warm woman's nature drooped earthward and sought for Hugh. But she shrank tremblingly from meeting him, wrote him a second vague postponement. Then regretted it an

Idols

hour after. She must see him, and that soon; before he encountered Gerard. What would happen if the two men met—Gerard mad with jealous passion, Hugh blazing with indignation? The gentler elements within her took fright. A month before she would have scouted the idea of violence as preposterous. Bloodshed in private quarrel was a thing, in England, of the evil and romantic past. But she would have counted as equally unreal the story of the recent sensational incidents in their lives. Now nothing seemed too improbable for possibility. Calais sands stretched wet and bloodstained before her imagination. But still she shrank from meeting Hugh.

She lay awake long that night, in the primly furnished room where once she had dreamed so many girlish dreams of the man she was about to marry, and strove to disentangle the complexities of her emotions. She dreaded Hugh learning Gerard's resolution. A cowardly impulse to send Hugh as mediator between Gerard and herself, was strangled at birth by a fierce grip of pride. If she alone could not convince her husband of her fidelity, what mattered his conviction at all? And then the realisation of that of which she stood self-accused lapped her woman's chastity in fire from head to foot. At last she slept. The morning came, but with it no letter of repentance, as she had vaguely hoped, from Gerard. His decision had been final. In the afternoon she went to Sunnington and

Idols

superintended the packing of her belongings. The maid Jane aided her, glancing every now and then with scared eyes at the set face of her mistress and dimly comprehending the anguish that lay behind. If Irene had gone through the rooms tearful and sobbing, the girl would have wept in sympathy; but there was that in Irene's manner that held her silent.

Only once did Irene break down, and then she was alone in the upstairs room, that had been a nursery, and whose high fire-guards—fixtures which they had not disturbed when they took over the house—still suggested its former use. And a small child's bed was there, occupied in her time by many little waifs. The associations the room had always evoked came back to her. She threw herself face downward on the bed.

“Thank God, thank God,” she cried, “I haven't got a child!”

Three days are sufficient for a sensation to become ancient history in London. This truth, like most others, is tame and unobtrusive and therefore apt to be disregarded by the still bloodshot vision of the hero of the sensation. The man in the street had forgotten Hugh, but Hugh overrated his memory and studiously kept out of his way. The West End knew him not. What time he did not remain restless in his flat, he walked or bicycled for miles into the country, filling

Idols

his lungs with the free, sweet spring air and drowning anxieties in the intoxication of motion and freedom.

He had not yet recovered his mental balance, rudely upset by the extraordinary termination of the trial. He knew not whether to call himself arrant knave or blatant fool; a sorry Don Quixote, degraded at the instant of self-plumage; or a poor marionette, with limbs jerked ludicrously by destiny. He had faced death for a contemptuous sentiment of personal honour, in connection with a woman he despised; life had been purchased for him at the cost of the honour of the one woman in the world for whom he would have gladly died a thousand deaths. How did his honour stand? Grotesquely tragic, under any aspect.

An interview with Irene and Gerard would perhaps restore some kind of equilibrium. But hitherto that had been denied. Twice Irene had written a brief "not yet." Delicacy commanded scrupulous obedience. But the truer and still untainted fountains of his heart welled out towards those two whose magnificent devotion transcended all power of gratitude. And an exquisite sadness of irony was superadded. Would the jury have convicted him, after Gardiner's handling of the evidence? Cold reason returned an assured negative. But this, those two should never know. Meanwhile he hungered for the sight of Irene.

A friend visited him on the third morning after the trial; Cahusac, a rosy, gold-spectacled man who held

Idols

a high position on one of the great dailies. Hugh was preparing to ride forth on his quest of the intoxication of budding lanes.

"I must get Holloway out of my blood," he explained, welcoming his friend. "I think of nothing but God's air and sunshine. But what brings you from your bed at this hour?"

"Selfishness. I come begging favours."

"I am the last one to confer them."

"What are your plans?" asked Cahusac, throwing himself into a seat.

Hugh made a helpless gesture. "I am a ruined man, Cahusac."

"My dear fellow, half the world forgets and the rest forgives. I have been about much lately, sounding society. The heroic condones. Pardon my frankness."

"And those two?"

"Who? The Merriams? Of course they are much discussed."

"I know," said Hugh. "Look—you asked me for my plans. This is one. I enter no house where I should be pardoned and the Merriams condemned."

"You must excuse me, Colmán," said Cahusac, somewhat at fault; "I am aware of delicate ground—but why do you speak of them unitedly? Merriam has broken no conventions; naturally, he will be received everywhere, as usual."

Idols

"He will claim equal privileges for his wife."

"But they are not continuing to live together, as if nothing had happened?"

"Just as if nothing had happened," replied Hugh, with the conviction of ignorance.

"And your relations remain unbroken?"

"Certainly," said Hugh.

Cahusac, who had been ascending the scale of mystification, rose from his chair.

"You are three astounding people—the world won't stand that, you know—it's almost too much for me, and I'm not squeamish. No. Hang it all—The *mari complaisant*—and Merriam is the last man in the world—it beats me altogether. Look here, I'll come back another time. I must digest this first!"

The cleanly Briton in him was disgusted. Polyandry in Terra del Fuego is ethnologically interesting. In England it wears a different aspect.

Hugh broke into a half laugh, and, striding forward, seized Cahusac by the shoulder and swung him round.

"You silly fool," he cried. "Do you suppose I'm the man to let you talk like this about my private affairs, if things were as you think? Has it never entered your head that the story was a lie from beginning to end? That Mrs. Merriam is the purest of women and the most spotless of wives? That it was the desperate stroke of two heroic friends to save a man's life?"

Idols

The journalist's rosy face expressed blank astonishment. He sank upon a chair and muttered incoherent wonder and apology.

"You are more astounding than ever!" he exclaimed at last. "Of course I was taken in, like the judge, jury, press, public, everybody—I'm heartily thankful."

Suddenly he grew very grave.

"Are you aware that you have committed a blazing indiscretion?"

"In telling you?"

"Yes."

"I know something of men," said Hugh in his grand way.

"You can no more know a man in calm weather than you can know a ship. I myself am not aware what a villain I could be, if it were worth my while. I'll try to keep straight. But don't trust any one else with your secret. The blabbing tongue—the ears of the police—that heroic woman had up for perjury—I need say no more."

Hugh walked about the room, agitated.

"You are right. Of course I knew it in a vague sort of way—but I have been driven half crazy—the strain of the last month—unimaginable—God knows how I pulled through. You are the first man I have spoken to. I couldn't bear to let you think ill of her—and your kind, honest mug was so refreshing to me

Idols

—I couldn't help it. I never realised clearly before, that to save her from penal servitude I must consent to stand by and see the world throw mud at her. What a complicated wreck one's life becomes as soon as it leaves the rails!"

"Don't make yourself miserable with false analogies," said Cahusac, philosophically. "I'm sick of the rails and I want to get off them. For that reason I asked what your plans were—I meant for the immediate future."

"I shall give up the bar," said Hugh, with a shudder, "at least criminal work. I said I was a ruined man. That's why."

"You persist in misunderstanding," said the other with a smile. "You forget I came to ask a favour—I am thinking of going abroad for a holiday, taking it now instead of in the inevitable August. Wife doesn't want to go. I am companionless. Will you take pity on me?"

Hugh's impulsive nature responded to all the motives of the kindly act. He seized Cahusac's hand.

"I won't thank you. There are some deeds of friendship beyond thanks. I'll come with you all the more gladly now that I have told you. But I should like to see the Merriams before we start."

Cahusac lifted his eyebrows. "You haven't seen them yet?"

Idols

Hugh received discomfort from his glance. He explained vaguely.

"Take your own time," said Cahusac, again rising to go. "Things are slack just now. I can get away pretty easily."

The Good Samaritan departed, and Hugh remained for some time speculative at the window, looking out into the sunshine. He had known Cahusac and his wife fairly intimately for several years. They were friends, too, of the Merriams. But hitherto he had shrouded his private life from them in his customary reserve. He wondered now at the indiscreet expansiveness of which he had been guilty. The secret was safe enough with Cahusac. But would he not have betrayed it, just the same, to a less scrupulous friend, who had come to him that morning with a sympathetic face? The thought gave qualms. The past year had loosened his character. The past month had played havoc with it; had weakened, too, his firm grasp of logical issues. Cahusac had enabled his mind to gain fresh hold. He faced the consequences of Irene's action with the pain of a great dismay.

The physical longing for air and sun and forgetfulness in quick motion lured him out of doors. He rode hard through Sunnington and along the Heath Road until he reached the open country. He traversed many miles that day, going along lonely stretches of clear road at racing speed which brought the thrill into

Idols

his veins and the lust of physical life that floods thought. He was in that condition of being which, in a more elemental age, would have carried him bare-sark into the joy of battle: modern civilisation substitutes the bicycle. Perhaps, after all, we are not more grotesque than our ancestors.

The dusk was falling when he returned by the Heath Road, dusty and thoroughly fatigued. He glanced wistfully at the Merriams' house as he sped by. The lights were not yet lit. It bore a strange aspect of desertion. For a moment he felt the impulse to turn and seek admittance, get through the strange first interview, whose indefinite postponement was growing stranger still. Irene's sensitiveness he could understand; besides, she had written twice. But Gerard's silence was unaccountable. Was he waiting, despite Irene's messages, for him to take the initiative? The temptation was strong; but obedience to Irene prevailed. He went on, letting his weary mind drift on trivial matters. He would have a meal, smoke, and sleep like a log. It would be the first sound, unstimulating sleep for many weeks. The night before he had had a shivering dream of Minna, which had kept him awake till morning. Where was she? He wondered vaguely.

Suddenly a figure crossing the road in front of him caused him to ring his bell. The figure turned. He recognised Irene. In a second he had dismounted

Idols

and was by her side. She extended her hand, looked at him frankly in the waning light.

"Fate has arranged it for us," he said. "If you knew how I have been hungering for speech with you!"

"I couldn't send for you," she replied. "There were reasons——"

"I know. I have waited patiently. But you feel what I have to express somehow to you and Gerard."

"You mustn't see Gerard," she said, with a little break in her voice. "I think it would be best if you did not see me, either. What is the good of words to thank me? We understand each other too well to need them. Couldn't you go away for a holiday somewhere? It would be the best for all of us. You mustn't be hurt—indeed, you mustn't. But you will do what I ask you?"

"Anything in the wide world. In fact, I am going abroad with Cahusac. I was only waiting until I had seen you. But I don't understand——"

He stopped, regarded her anxiously. In spite of the falling darkness, he could see that she looked thoroughly ill.

"I may as well tell you at once," she said, with quiet abruptness, moving a step nearer to him and laying her fingers on the bicycle handle. "You are making the same mistake as I did—reckoning on Ger-

Idols

ard's acquiescence. He is unspeakably angry. We have quarrelled over it. That is why I didn't send for you. If you could do anything, I should ask you. But it is a matter solely concerning the two of us. Time will set it right."

She spoke so quietly that he never suspected the truth. On the other hand, he could well realise that, Gerard not consenting, the public sacrifice of his honour should arouse his furious indignation. His conception of the breach between Irene and Gerard was sufficient in itself to keep him speechless with pain and remorse.

"It wasn't your fault, dear Hugh," she said, at length, comfortingly. "And don't think I regret what I did. Gerard will see it in the same light as myself some day."

"But now—to cause this division between you—I wish I had pleaded guilty. It would have settled everything at once."

The words fell somewhat incoherently. He writhed under a sense of impotence. How could he comfort or reassure her? His wits floundered. Suddenly they came into sharp contact with an idea. Why was she walking away from the house at this hour of the evening? He put the question.

"I am staying with my aunt, in Redcliffe Gardens," she replied, calmly. "It was best to avoid the tension at home."

Idols

"I cannot blame Gerard," said Hugh, in a low voice. "And yet, I thought——"

"Yes," said Irene, looking him full in the face. "We both thought."

Hitherto they had been standing still by the roadside. Now she turned and moved onwards, Hugh accompanying her, slowly wheeling his machine—an incongruous element.

"You can see now why I want you to go away for a little?"

"Only too clearly," he said, bitterly.

Irene knew that he did not see at all, and cast up at him an instinctive feminine glance, half-grateful, half-pitying.

"When shall you start?"

"Practically at once—as soon as Cahusac can get away. Are you anxious that I should go quickly?"

"I should feel easier."

"Can I come to see you before I leave?"

"Best not. It will make no difference between us. The old friendship remains."

They had come to the end of the line of villa residences, to the cross-road that marked the beginning of Sunnington proper. Irene halted.

"You must ride on," she said, extending her hand. He saw the social necessity. They were a marked couple, and several passers-by had already turned curious eyes upon them.

Idols

"I shall stay abroad until I have your permission to return," he said.

She smiled sadly. It would not be her summons that would bring him back from exile. But she nodded an assent. He pressed her hand, murmured a "God bless you," and rode off.

The interview that each had looked forward to, with such trepidation, was over. Irene felt somewhat faint from the strain. Deceit was alien to her nature which ever erred in over-frankness. Yet when he quickly disappeared from her following eyes into the gathering darkness, she gave a little sob of relief and hurried on at a brisk pace.

CHAPTER XVI

"TELL me, Harroway," said Gerard, "you who are the friend of us all, and would like to defend both my wife and Colman, does her story hold water?"

"I should let things alone for the present," replied the lawyer, cautiously; "make investigations, give her for the while the benefit of the doubt."

"But there can't be any doubt. The whole thing hangs together. Colman was over head and ears in love with her before our marriage. He has been openly in love with her ever since. They have been associated in all her confounded schemes and philanthropies. He was always on her tongue and in her thoughts—always in the house when I wasn't there. I remember he wanted to jump down my throat once because I suggested Irene had her faults like others. Look at those poems of his addressed to her. All the same story. This charge of murder is brought against him. His mouth is closed. For a time I didn't believe the woman plea. However, we all agreed there was one. Who could it be? All of us floored. My wife half dead with anxiety—yet going through it day by day. We know what women can bear when it's a question of concealment—a woman the other

Idols

day was delivered of a child during a ball, and returned smiling to the ball-room—you saw the case. I don't call Irene's attitude any criterion of innocence. She keeps it up to the end. But when the rope is round his neck, her nerve gives way, and the whole thing comes out. Put upon oath, she gives it cut and dried—as cynically as you please—a woman all over. There's no getting out of it. And I—I am the common mock of England."

He spoke quietly, with an air of outraged dignity that won Harroway's sympathy.

"It's a miserable business altogether," said the latter, biting the end of his quill-pen, as he sat in his leathern office-chair, pushed back slightly from the table.

"Then you agree with me that her explanation is preposterous?"

"The other thing bears the greater stamp of probability," replied Harroway. And thus was Irene judged. Gerard felt relieved. Harroway's opinion was of a certain value. It was sure to be the keynote of that of the Merriams' social circle in which the old solicitor was an influential member, and Gerard was anxious to learn how society would take his divorce. For that purpose he had sought out Harroway in his office and plunged into the midst of things, with a frankness that was not altogether characteristic. He had gained his first point—a definite verdict against

Idols

Irene. He himself believed her guilty. But a lurking, uncomfortable suspicion that proof of her innocence might not sing with his heart's secret wishes made him distrustful of his own judgment. The contemplation of divorce was accompanied by sundry pricks of conscience. A vague fear assailed him that society might take Irene's side. He sought the support of public opinion to bolster up a not too stout courage. He had a dim feeling that, in spite of his willingly jealous belief in her guilt, he was about to do Irene a great wrong by divorcing her.

"I am not a revengeful man, Harroway," he said after a few moments' silence. "I am only anxious to put an end to a tie the continuance of which would be a farce. It is not even as though I were putting her to public shame. She has done that herself already."

"Then I would not be precipitate," said Harroway. "You might feel disposed to forgive her. Such things have happened to men without loss of dignity."

"I'm not going to forgive her. I don't think she would desire it. The fact is our marriage has been a sham from the beginning. If I divorce her, she can marry Colman. I'm not likely—God forbid—to tie myself to a woman again. So it's not for my sake. If I were seeking vengeance I should keep her legally tied. And I shan't sue for damages."

Idols

"The action would have to be undefended."

"Precisely," said Ger ard, with a slight flush.

Harroway rose and took two or three turns about the room, his hands behind his back.

"I see no other way out of it, Merriam," he said.

"I was hoping you could forgive her—take her back, sometime. I am fond of her. In fact, fond of the three of you, confound it! The whole business has upset me. First the murder affair—and now this. Yes. It's best. Let somebody be happy, at any rate. You are acting generously—but I'd like you to give her a little grace—unless time is important."

"It is important," said Ger ard. "I want to get away. I don't see why I should go on slaving at the bar any longer. If it hadn't been for my wife I should have chucked it long ago. I have about six hundred a year of my own. Why the deuce should I worry myself?"

"What are you thinking of doing?"

"South Africa. Big game shooting. One of the dreams of my life. I'm sick of this atmosphere. I want to breathe freely. I know Freewintle—the big man at that sort of thing, you know. He's going out in two or three months. I don't see why I should lose the chance of going with him. So I should like to set everything straight by then."

Harroway nodded his head with mournful assent.

"I can quite understand."

Idols

He walked across the room, then back again and halted before Gerard.

"But you know, Merriam, I would willingly give a thousand pounds to have your wife proved innocent."

"I would give all I have to be able to believe her," returned Gerard. But his tone sounded disingenuous in his own ears.

"I am not going to ask you to act for me, professionally," he added.

"I suppose not," replied Harroway, drily.

They shook hands and parted. Gerard took a long breath as soon as he reached the open air, and the look of dignified sorrow vanished from his face. He walked through Lincoln's Inn Fields with a step that was almost jaunty—greatly pleased by his visit. If there had been anything mean or cruel in his proposed action, Harroway would have protested bluntly, for flabbiness of expression was not one of his characteristics. Obviously it was the only thing to be done. The sooner the better. As he turned into Chancery Lane a child held up to him a basket of violets. He bought a bunch, stuck it in his button-hole, a thing which he had not done for years, being a man neglectful of spruceness in attire. He felt exhilarated, in holiday mood, experiencing a sensation of freedom from chafing constraints.

Two weeks had passed since his furious interview

Idols

with Irene. He had spent them at his friend Weston's place, alone, for the owner was absent, where he fished, and, between the rises, meditated on his wrongs. He had spoken to Irene in violent indignation and hatred, brutally, as the coarse-grained man does when he feels himself to be injured. Instinct, that explosion of a long-laid train of a thousand tiny sensations, had directed his blow against her most vital spot—her idealisation of himself. He had left her in passionate anger. It was well that he did not encounter Hugh that day. In the calm of the country life his anger cooled down, but it had engendered a crop of sentiments which, when he examined them, turned out to be not altogether disagreeable. /As he was not the man to have his senses long led captive by the same woman, the honeymoon fervour of his attachment to Irene had grown cold for some years. The glowing passion of love, therefore, had not been outraged. As a matter of fact, he was tired of her, like thousands of men at the present moment, whom habit and sloth and kind integrity keep dully affectionate to their wives. He was tired of her effusiveness, of her strenuousness, of the high plane of feeling on which she seemed to live, and of her unremitting efforts to drag him thither. He had never felt at ease with her, had been forced to practise a thousand deceptions; to live, in short, a life alien to his nature. In the daily unconscious struggle between two individ-

Idols

ualities, the stronger and more finely tempered wins. Gerard had yielded simply because he had been afraid to resist. The subconsciousness of this moral flabbiness had always been present. It acted now as a forcing-bed for the above-mentioned crop of sentiments.

The violets in his buttonhole typified their bursting into riotous bloom. He walked across the Strand and down westward along the embankment, his veins tingling. The fresh breeze blowing against the tide raised a myriad ripples that sparkled in the sunshine. A gull that had strayed up river was hovering snow-white against the blue sky. The steamers, with their illusory air of crowded merriment, shot swiftly by, and gave a queer sense of the rushing life of liberty. Every man has certain moments of sensitiveness to external surroundings. With Gerard they were rare; but this was one. Life was holding out her promise, the world was before him. He felt magnanimous towards Hugh; almost grateful to him for having given him this opportunity of re-starting his existence. He was young still, only five-and-thirty. A recent legacy had put him beyond the necessity of working at an irksome and unremunerative profession. He leaned over the parapet by Somerset House, and in the factories across the water saw the wide stretching veldt and the lumbering bullock-carts and all the joys of the longed-for hunter's life. A lingering respect-

Idols

ability no longer sought to disguise the fact; he was heartily glad to be freed from Irene.

And so it happened that, some days afterwards, while Cahusac was sitting with Hugh before their hotel at Avignon, and opening the letters which the swarthy waiter had just brought, he was astonished to see Hugh start to his feet, and, white and trembling with passion, stare at a communication which he dashed presently upon the table.

"The villain—the damned villain!"

Cahusac queried mutely through his gold spectacles.

"He is bringing an action for divorce—for divorce against her—do you understand?"

"Don't shout so, man, and sit down," said Cahusac, quietly. Hugh obeyed mechanically, tore at his great moustache, and went on in a voice rendered hoarse by his effort to keep it within conversational tones:

"He believes that story. Is proceeding on the strength of it. A woman who idolised him, made him her god—the veriest cur would have understood. My God! Cahusac, I'll go back at once and shoot him on sight. He doesn't deserve to live. To cast off a woman like that. By heaven, I'll kill him."

"Don't talk like a madman," said Cahusac.

"I can't sit here. Come for a turn with me. I shall be better walking."

Idols

Cahusac stuffed his correspondence into his pocket and accompanied him out of doors. They passed beneath the frowning mass of the old Palace of the Popes, with its innumerable towers and machicolated battlements, and reached the outer boulevards. The mid-day sun beat fiercely down. Below them lay the blue Rhone, winding through this garden of Southern France. The sun, the scene, and Cahusac's quiet yet sympathetic common sense gradually calmed Hugh's blazing anger.

"Had you no suspicion that it might come to this?" asked Cahusac, as they walked along under the trees.

"None whatever. Do you think if I had, I should have loitered about here? I knew he had quarrelled with her. She told me. I could see nothing unnatural in it. There are some sacrifices beyond the power of the average man. She thought he was equal to herself. I didn't. At least for a day or two I did—just after the trial. Then came disillusion. You were right in what you said about knowledge of men. One can only test them by tempest. This one has been tested. He's no better, no worse, than that fellow over there with the white umbrella and the rolls of fat at the back of his neck. In fact, I was obliged, after a time, to sympathise with him. What right had I to expect that a man would make such a sacrifice for me? I was powerless to reconcile them.

Idols

It was her urgent wish that I should disappear for a few weeks—until things got settled. But I never, for one second, thought he doubted. We have been friends from childhood, he and I—intimates. He knows every syllable that has ever passed between his wife and myself. A thunderbolt out of this blue sky could not appall me more than this ghastly news."

"To tell you a secret," said Cahusac, "I saw the clay feet of the idol long ago. A good fellow in his way—the average sensual man."

"The discovery must be killing her," said Hugh.

"I wonder why she did not tell you before you started."

"I don't pretend to know. She had her reasons. I am quite satisfied. I could never put her into the dull category of common women. And to think that that man—Cahusac, he can't believe it of her. Some infernal villainy is at work."

He broke forth again. Cahusac quietly listened out the torrent of indignation. It held elements of the rhapsodic that interested him.

They returned through the town. Hugh rushed into the telegraph office and despatched a message.

"Are you mad? I am coming."

"I hope you have done nothing rash," said Cahusac, who had waited for him outside.

"I've told him that I am coming. I must go

Idols

back straight, Cahusac. It is treating you miserably. But you see I can't go on. I must see him—put a stop to this infamous business—drag him to his knees before his wife."

"Take a sober man's advice, Colman," said the other, "and have it out with Mrs. Merriam first."

Hugh's eyes flashed and his lips curled in a smile beneath his moustache. Superfluous counsel! His heart hungered for her. There was a spice of irony in his thanks.

A few hours later Cahusac accompanied him to the railway station. The final adieux came.

"I owe you a great debt of gratitude, Cahusac," said Hugh.

"I have enjoyed every minute of the holiday," replied the other heartily.

"So have I. It has made a fresh man of me. I can face this now, thanks to you. If it had come on top of all the rest, I believe it would have floored me. A man is only capable of a certain amount of convulsion at a time."

They parted, and the great P. L. M. train carried Hugh swiftly northwards. He had spoken truly. He was under a deep obligation to the quiet, kind-hearted man whose calm judgment and equable nature formed a complete sedative to the fever of his mind, whose companionship was a cool hand on a hot brow. A great need of expansion had been the

Idols

reaction from the intense restraint of the month preceding his trial. His thoughts paid Cahusac grateful tribute.

A study of time-tables suddenly brought him to realisation of the date. It was the anniversary of his wedding day. The first. It was scarcely credible. The disastrous twelvemonth, viewed in retrospect, seemed a space of many years. The memory of the first wedded kiss of Minna's young ripe lips came faintly as if from a far past, yet not without a spasm of revulsion; the memory of a *succubus*. Elemental sex feelings, determining hatred, bend a man's judgment of a woman to elemental fierceness. For this reason often are women beaten. He tried to shake off the haunting sense of her caresses—to bury her existence in oblivion. But she was too essential a factor in this ruin of lives amongst which he was walking. What had become of her? He clenched his hands together, and wished that she was dead.

Yet what was she doing? The petty and incongruous question teased him.

A train whirred past. Was it a strange fatality, or an equally strange telepathic sub-consciousness? In that train was Minna, convalescent after a long illness, being carried on to Marseilles, where she was to catch the steamer to Smyrna. So husband and wife passed each other in the darkness, on the first

Idols

anniversary of their wedding-day, and the soul of each was filled with passionate repudiation of the other. And in either case the starry woman, whom one worshipped and the other dreaded and envied, was the determining cause.

CHAPTER XVII

THE train drew up slowly beside the platform at Victoria, three-quarters of an hour late. Hugh stood by the half-opened door, in a fume of impatience. He had telegraphed from Paris to Irene that he would be with her at eight. It was that hour now. He must go straightway, for he had resolved to have speech with her that night, and further delay would render his visit untimely. A porter from the Grosvenor Hotel came running up at his call, and took charge of his bag and hold-all. Relieved of responsibilities of luggage, he pushed his way through the hurrying stream of passengers on the platform, towards the cab-rank. But before he could engage a cab, he heard the light patter of hastening footsteps behind him, and his name uttered in a familiar voice. He turned in astonished delight.

“ Irene! ”

“ Another minute and I should have missed you,” she said somewhat breathlessly.

“ You have come to meet me? I never dreamed——”

“ Of course not,” she said with a smile. “ Your

Idols

sex never does. Did you think I could receive you at Redcliffe Gardens? Your name is anathema there. I am only allowed on sufferance. I could not bear you to be denied the door. Besides, I wanted to see you. So I came."

"And you have been waiting all this time? Men are brutes, Irene. I did not think of it. Forgive me."

"For what? For your anxiety to serve me? You were coming straight to me after a twenty-four hours' journey, without stopping to wash your hands or take food. That needs no forgiveness."

They had been standing at the spot where they had met. He looked anxiously into her face. It was singularly calm and tender, though the eyes were a little weary, and the past month had brought lines about the corners of the delicate mouth. Wonder was mingled with his feelings of relief, for he had expected to find a woman broken down with trouble. Then his phrase about the dull category of common women crossed his mind, and he smiled.

"Where shall we talk, Irene?" he said, with a man's helplessness.

"Are you going to Sunnington?"

"No. It is too far. I am putting up at the hotel."

"Let us go there," she said, turning, with prompt decision.

Idols

"Will it be wise?" said Hugh.

She laughed, ever so little scornfully.

"A sweep is not afraid of blacking his fingers when he handles coal. I am past such conventionalities."

"You are mistaken. Quite the contrary."

"I am not mistaken, Hugh," she replied with quiet firmness. "Please let me have my own way in this."

He bowed in assent, and they walked on together.

"A private sitting-room?"

"That would be more comfortable."

There was a long silence on their way to the hotel. The reference to the subject of their interview was a touch of ice. Presently he asked :

"How did you guess that I should come to Victoria instead of Charing Cross?"

"You wired 'arrive 7.10.' I looked in a Bradshaw. The Charing Cross train is timed to get in five minutes later. Men haven't all the sense, you know."

The flash of her old bantering manner cheered him. He laughed a little compliment to her sagacity.

"I chose Victoria because it was nearer to you," he said.

They reached the hotel. Hugh explained his wants at the office. A waiter conducted them to a private sitting-room, switched on the light, drew

Idols

down the Venetian blinds, and left them to the room's rather stiff and imposing comforts.

"You must be very tired," said Irene, woman-like. "Go and get something to eat—and then we'll talk. Do. To please me."

Her old solicitude and kindly intimacy. The upheaval had not altered her attitude towards him. Her steadfastness touched him deeply.

"You have a heart of gold, Irene," he said.

But he disclaimed hunger or fatigue, and sat down in the saddle-bag chair opposite her, wondering at the peace of mind that these few moments of companionship could bring him, in defiance of the devastating emotions at work below the surface. She pushed up her veil and regarded him wistfully.

"You are looking much older. Your face has grown lined—and no wonder."

"What I have gone through is small compared with the ruin I have brought on you."

"If it is in any way your doing, Hugh, you have brought me to the truth," she replied.

"The truth?"

"Yes. I was living in a Fool's Paradise. I see now that disillusion was bound to have come sooner or later. Instead of the glamour disappearing bit by bit through unhappy years, it has all been torn off at once. Gerard did not love me. He is quite a different being from the man I loved. I prefer realities to

Idols

shams. I have arrived at the truth, and so I am content."

"But he shall arrive at the truth, too," cried Hugh, starting to his feet. "He shall lick the dust before you—for the deadly wrong he wants to inflict on you. I had no idea before I left. If I had seen him yesterday when the news reached me, I should have—Perhaps it is well I didn't see him. Why did you send me away? Did you know at the time?"

"Yes," she replied, "I knew. But I wanted to see whether it was merely blind rage or whether time would bring a change. I felt it was better for you two not to meet in hot blood."

"I could have stopped it, at once. Given you back your happiness."

"Do you understand me so little?" she asked with an air of reproach.

"I could have convinced him, brought him to your feet. And I shall—to-morrow."

"For God's sake don't," she exclaimed quickly.

"I must. He shall not drag your name through the mud of the courts. I should be a hound to allow it."

"What can you do?"

"Prove to him where I was that night. I was in a woman's company—not in her arms, thank God. You are the first living soul to whom I have avowed it. Both of you shall know her name and the reason of my silence."

Idols

"No, no, for God's sake, no!" cried Irene again.

He stopped short, checked in his outburst by her tone, and the intense earnestness of her face.

"Why not?"

"Do you think I could accept his—apologies?"

"He would make reparation."

"I will not have any. If his knowledge of me—of the love that I bore him—was not sufficient to clear me in his eyes, do you think it would be other than humiliation to me that he should be convinced by outside proof?"

"I enter only too deeply into your feelings, Irene. But it will put a stop to this unholy action. Do you suppose I can rest, while it is hanging over you?"

"Listen, Hugh," she said with a half smile. "Sit down and let us talk quietly. We have been on the emotional strain too long. I don't want this action stopped. I blessed the instinct that made you come to me first—so that I could tell you. I have never seen any transcendental sacredness in marriage. You know that well enough. I regard it as the social sanction of a man and woman living together. I would not live with Gerard again for all the world. It would also be his last desire. This is a blessed chance of sundering our lives, legally, for ever. There are no children to be considered. What public dishonour the divorce court can bring upon a woman is mine already. I have nothing to lose, Hugh, and all to gain."

Idols

"What have you to gain?"

"My liberty. My own life."

"Remember that society awards less penalty to the forgiven wife than to the divorced one."

"I want no patronage of society," she flashed out spiritedly. "I am not a repentant Magdalene."

There was a long silence. Hugh lay back in his chair, his cheek supported by his hand, his brows knit in stern thought. She sat in more feminine attitude, slightly leaning forward, her eyes fixed on the simpering imitation Watteau group on the fire-screen. Suddenly she spoke, without diverting her glance.

"I was acting when I saw you last. It was an effort to be calm. Now I am genuine."

Her serenity had been won inch by inch; a great nature defying woman's weakness that clung in bleeding desperation to the shattered illusions, finally routing it, and planting its own standard on the abandoned citadel. The battle had been fought during the interval of utter solitude. Yet not won without cost. She emerged calm, but weary and wounded and aching of heart, with loss of ideals and purpose in life. The committee of her beloved Institution, to which she had given so much earnest enthusiasm, had written an ashamed and pained suggestion of her resignation. She answered almost within the minute of reading, paying bravely the penalty of her tarnished name. But the rapid dashes of the pen were like sword thrusts through

Idols

her flesh. With Gerard standing by her side on the starry plane of sacrifice, she would have accepted such penalties happily, for the dear friend's sake. But alone, with Gerard against her, she needed all her proud strength to bear the pain unfalteringly. She had conquered, however, and could face the present and the future undaunted. Love was dead and buried. It had been her life. She would find a truer meaning to the strange new life upon which she was entering. But first the old apparellings must be cast away, and she must go forth free. She longed for the legal dissolution of the tie that still bound her to Gerard.

With a man's burning sense of wrong inflicted on the beloved woman, Hugh could not appreciate the intense earnestness of her desire. To divorce her was a deadly insult which made the barbaric man's fingers tingle to be at the throat of the insulter. Barbaric vanity, too, compelled his thoughts to the pitiable figure he would cut, if he stood by silent, and allowed this outrage to be committed. He shifted his attitude impatiently and tugged at his moustache. The woman read him, and smiled.

"Whatever your secret is, Hugh, you must keep it to yourself," she said gently. "A man doesn't face death for a trifle. That woman's honour is still in your keeping."

Hugh felt the phrase like a barbed arrow. He snapped his fingers.

Idols

"That for her honour! It was not in question. My own, if you like. I seduced no man's wife nor dishonoured his children. I wrote you the truth from the prison—I can't tell you more without entering upon the story."

"If you did, I should hold you false to your word," said Irene. "And that you have never been. Let me know one true man, at any rate. I despise Fatima curiosities with all my soul. Tell me truly. You made a solemn promise of silence?"

"Certainly."

"Then you must not break it. I couldn't accept my rehabilitation with Gerard at that price, even if I desired it."

"I accepted a far greater sacrifice from you, Irene," he said in a low voice.

The tone brought the starting tears into her eyes. Impulsively she rose from her seat, and threw herself on her knees by his side, her hands clasping the arm of his chair.

"Yes, Hugh. It was a great thing that I did for you. But gladly, Hugh dear, gladly. God forbid I should regret it ever. You can repay me by granting me any request I make you in the name of what I did for you—you could not refuse."

"You have me in your power, Renie. My life is at your disposal."

"Then you will serve me in the truest and deepest

Idols

way by keeping faithful to your word, and letting Gerard take this course undisturbed. Promise me."

He rose, raised her to her feet, and kissed her hands, bending over them in the courtly way that recalled vividly to her mind a similar action, years ago, when he had first pledged himself to her service.

"I promise," he said.

She smiled shyly, and flushed in slight embarrassment at the recollection.

"I am glad you have come back," she said. "I shall feel much stronger. A woman must always have something outside herself to lean on. We are poor things."

Hugh protested. She was apart from other women. What woman alive could have come out of such an ordeal with her faith in humanity unshaken, with her queenly tenderness unhardened? What woman had the crystalline intellect that could remain undimmed by the soul's gloom and could pierce through it to the heart of things? The man's pent-up passion squandered itself in hyperbole. He raised her to transcendental heights of greatness. She stood, with her hands clasped in front of her, her eyes following him as he paced the room passionately declaiming her excellencies, and felt an odd little thrill of something like happiness. Here at least was a man who believed in her; a genuine man, who had given startling

Idols

proof of heroism. Her clear intelligence rejected the rhapsody with an indulgent smile, but her woman's nature, thirsting for comfort, drank in the praise.

The chime of the black marble clock on the mantelpiece warned her of the hour. She announced her departure.

"You will see me through this, Hugh? You are the only one left that I can trust."

"The only help I can give you is inaction. The hardest for an impatient man."

"You can talk to me and advise me."

"Where? I cannot visit you."

"I have taken a flat. Am busy furnishing. In a few days I shall be installed there. Meanwhile you can help me to fix things straight, if you will. That will be material assistance. Things like that are hard for a woman alone."

"It will make me almost happy and light-hearted again," he replied.

They moved together towards the door. At the threshold he paused and regarded her earnestly.

"Will you tell me one thing, Irene, before we part to-night—frankly and honestly?"

"What is it?" she asked, with a sudden flutter of anxiety.

"Is it possible that all this ruin I have brought about you has not changed your feelings towards me—turned them, ever so little, to bitterness?"

Idols

His heart leapt at the quick radiance that came into her face.

"I have never felt till now, what our friendship really meant."

He lay awake for some time that night, lost in a great wonder at the staunch steel of her nature. Here was one who had lost everything the world held dear, husband, home, good-repute, society, work, all through him, a once rejected lover, on whom she had bestowed her friendship for her husband's sake, and a word of regret had never passed her lips—still less a word of reproach; her old loyal friendship had come bright through such a test as stains and fouls the fairest comradeship between man and woman. Did the earth elsewhere hold humanity so transcendent? The commoner needs of the bruised child of clay that might have suggested a solution, the man forgot in his adoration. Up till now she had been the great and hopeless love of his life, to which he had been ever loyal in thought and word. Henceforward she was to be the divinity of his impassioned worship.

The deified being, unconscious of her apotheosis, but only feeling a heart-broken, weary woman, cheered by a dear and loyal friend, reached her home and found two letters awaiting her. She took them to her bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed to read them. The first, a large packet, contained a collection of tracts and religious leaflets. She was about to throw

Idols

them aside, when her eye caught a flaring title: "The Woman who Sinned and was Saved." The other pamphlets bore analogous inscriptions. She flushed hot with wrath at the outrage—then rose and tore the insulting papers across and across in a frenzy of indignation, and threw them into the grate. The request of the committee had been a social necessity, to which she had bowed her head in resignation. The insult of this anonymous evangelist scorched her. Forgetting the other letter, she proceeded to undress, anxious to get into the darkness, and lay her burning cheek upon the pillow. She thought fiercely of Hugh, of the savage joy it would be if he could find out and horsewhip the offender. But before she extinguished her light, the second envelope caught her attention. She broke it open, setting her teeth against fresh humiliation. She read the letter. Then sat down on the bed and began to cry, like a foolish woman. It was only a little note from Mrs. Cahusac, urging, with delicate tact, the claims of a friend.

Hugh did not seek out Gerard. Days passed. At last they met one morning at Sunnington station. Hugh marched up straight to him.

"You are a pretty blackguard, Gerard Merriam."

Gerard drew up his big frame and returned his old friend's keen gaze with a stare.

"And you?"

Idols

"I am an honest man, and in your heart you know it."

"Honesty is a relative term."

"And you know that your wife is a pure woman."

"Who meets you on your arrival in England, and spends hours with you in a private room of an hotel?"

"Have you been setting spies on her?" asked Hugh.

"I follow the usual course adopted by men in my position."

The district train dashed into the station.

"Ifene was right," returned Hugh, turning contemptuously. "You are not worth trying to convince."

They entered different compartments, left the train at different stations, and for some years did not meet again face to face.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE months passed. The decree *nisi* was pronounced, in due course made absolute. It was a period for Irene of entire calm and repose. The strong soul braces itself to stand the storm of great events; in the dull after-time it yields to the beseechings of the exhausted flesh. Day after day Irene read and thought and rested, scarcely desirous of other pursuits. Her outlook over men and things was narrowed within the horizon of an invalid or a prisoner. The waves of life beat unheeded against the fortress of her seclusion. Her servant Jane—who had begged to be taken into her service when the Sunnington establishment was broken up, on Gerard's going abroad—the Cahusacs, and Hugh were the population of her universe. During these months of reaction and physical and moral apathy, she desired no more from life than immunity from its stress. An ample income, her own heritage, kept her assured against material cares, and the need of work for its own sake was stifled by the much greater need of self-reconstruction. And even after the healing of torn fibres, she loved the soothing calm of her lethargy.

Idols

Then, suddenly, a slight shock from the outer world gave a necessary stimulus. Hugh came to her one afternoon, in great excitement, brandishing an evening paper.

"The mystery is cleared at last! They have found the murderers. As I said all along—a common, sordid burglary!"

The discovery of some burglar's tools buried in the wood behind The Lindens, coupled with the fact that, at the time of the murder, two well-known ticket-of-leave men had failed to report themselves, had put the police on the track. The miscreants were captured.

Irene revived, devoured greedily, during the succeeding weeks, the newspaper reports of the case. The wretches confessed during their trial; were eventually hanged. In spite of her own public disproof of Hugh's guilt, she had never been able to free herself from the horrible feeling that he still walked before the eyes of the world under the black shadow of suspicion. This was eternally dispelled.

"Did you never think it possible," said Hugh one day, "that I might have done it—in a fit of anger?"

"You would have given yourself up and faced the consequences like a man," replied Irene.

When he mused, a while later, on the saying, a queer feeling of pity wove itself into his thoughts of her. If she only could see mortality in those upon whom she bestowed her affection or her friendship!

Idols

The awakened spirit of the woman rose with a hunger for fresh interests. To one with a keen mind, a fervent heart, and a full purse, London offers no lack of occupation. Gradually she gathered round her a little array of charitable duties, which she performed in quiet, unostentatious fashion. Again, the years of happy labour had borne ripe fruit of knowledge. She showed Hugh one day an article which she had written on "Some Unrecorded Facts of Infant Mortality." In his enthusiastic way he bore it off to an editor of his acquaintance, who took it for his journal. It was the beginning of a series of articles signed "Delta" that attracted considerable attention. Thus Irene found a vocation. But being a very human woman, she sighed occasionally for that which she had surrendered and for the comfort that came not.

One afternoon Harroway stood in the street comically perturbed, watching the retreating figure of Hugh, who had marched away in great wrath. He shrugged his shoulders and returned to his office; but the perturbation remained and accompanied him home. It was his usual experience of Hugh Colman. The man was like a cigar that smokes mildly and comfortably until, piff! paff! with awful unexpectedness, some maliciously secreted gunpowder sends the thing to smithereens. Thus Harroway summed him up to his wife, during that evening's dressing hour, while he tied his white tie. The imitations of the explosion,

Idols

interrupting the operation and endangering the cambric, brought down conjugal rebuke.

"Your usual tact, I suppose, my dear," said his wife suavely.

Harroway waited until the two little pats announced that he was well and duly cravatted and then burst out. Tact! If he had to humour Mr. Hugh Colman, whom on earth was he to speak straight to? A man who owed his first brief to him. A man whom he had set his heart on making the most brilliant advocate of the day—who had egregiously disappointed him. A man for whom he was even now trying to build up a chancery practice—Tact, indeed!

"You've said that so often, my dear," said his wife. "If only you would tell me why he exploded to-day I might more readily sympathise with you."

Harroway explained. He had been lunching with Chevasse the artist. Talk had fallen upon Hugh and Mrs. Merriam. Chevasse, very broad-minded and kindly disposed to them both, had been talking the matter over with the Cahusacs. Mrs. Cahusac, of course, was unconventional enough to keep in with Mrs. Merriam, but Mrs. Chevasse was like Harroway's own Selina, and drew certain lines.

"Very rightly," interrupted Mrs. Harroway. "Hard and fast. Marriage lines."

"Precisely," said Harroway. "That's Mrs. Chevasse's attitude also. I uphold you. I'm fond

Idols

of them both. I help Hugh all I can. Would help her if I could, but I'm not going to visit a woman my wife doesn't visit. And my wife doesn't countenance irregular liaisons. I'm old-fashioned enough to agree with you fully. Let them get married decently and we'd stretch a point. So would the Chevasses. One or two others doubtless would be ready to meet them. I dare say Gardiner and his wife. Everybody is sorry for them. As sorry as they are for Merriam. Somehow the luridness of the tragedy disposes people to forgive them."

"The man's pluck was heroic. Almost an atonement in itself," said Mrs. Harroway.

"Almost. So was the woman's. But there is the eternal law, you know. Hundreds of women would be glad to meet Colman. You would, Selina."

"Yes," she replied frankly, "I should be willing to receive him, but he won't come."

"That's where I admire the man. He mixes with men. Of course he's obliged to. But he won't cross the threshold of a woman who doesn't receive Irene Merriam. He's a strong-willed devil, and he'll stick to that all his life. Selina, I wish to goodness I could believe the story she told Merriam! But it's beyond possibility, and the other is only too miserably human."

"If you want to get to Mr. Colman's explosion, before the people come to dinner, Algernon, you had

Idols

better make haste," said his wife, fan and gloves in hand, advancing with the calm of buxom years to the ottoman where he was sitting.

"It will take you half an hour to put on your new gloves, my dear," he retorted. He emphasised the fact of their newness, because he had brought them home with him that afternoon.

"So like a man," murmured Mrs. Harroway.

"Well, sit down and I'll tell you," he said, making room for her on the ottoman.

She sat and busied herself with the gloves, and Harroway relapsed into narrative. In the middle of the discussion with Chevasse, in walked Hugh. The restaurant was one of his usual haunts. Sat down at their table, and talked about things in general in the charmingest of moods. One would have thought him the mildest mannered man—like Lambro.

"Like *who*?" said Mrs. Harroway.

"Don't interrupt, we haven't time," replied Harroway with a chuckle.

He resumed. Chevasse went away, leaving him alone with Hugh. They had coffee, liqueurs, and cigars. Things very comfortable. Harroway enquired after Mrs. Merriam. She was well, though of course feeling the quietness of her life. She was writing on social subjects, under a pseudonym, and was making a little reputation. But it was bitter for her. Here was the chance. What need of tact?

Idols

Why didn't he marry her? Hugh twirled his moustache. Selina knew the way. Began to look dangerous. He supposed that was what everybody was asking. There was no question of marriage between them. Never had been. Never would be. He drank off his coffee, threw away his cigar, and put his hands in his pockets. He worshipped the ground she trod on, said he; would give up his life for her any day. But no idea of marriage.

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Harroway, wide-eyed.

"I don't know. How should I? I said it was his duty. Replies that he knows where his duty lies. I suggest that society demands it. He damns society. I get him to listen to me. Tell him about Chevasse. He looks at me with those blue sword-blade eyes of his, just as he looked at Hanna at the trial. 'It's for her sake,' I said. 'Pardon an old friend's bluntness.' 'Of course I pardon anything you choose to say, you know that well enough,' he replied. So I went on; told him that every woman in her position was not offered such a chance of social recognition. He calls the waiter, tosses him some silver, waves him away with a lordly gesture as he fumbles for change, and gets up. I accompany him to the street. 'It's very good of your wife and Chevasse—tell them so,' says he, 'but I'm not going to do it.' 'Well,' I said, 'it's scarcely honourable, Hugh.' Whereupon he grips me on the shoulder—the rheumatic one, my

Idols

dear; I feel it now—and bawls out, ‘Damn it, man, if you think me an infernal blackguard say so at once.’ I was nettled—also in physical pain—so I did say it. And then he gave his shoulders a shrug and stalked away like a madman.”

Mrs. Harroway looked at him demurely. “I suppose you think you managed it all beautifully.” Then she laughed. But Harroway got up indignant.

“Hang it all, Selina!” he exclaimed, “I did expect a little sympathy from you.”

Whereupon she mollified him, so that he should eat his dinner with an unruffled mind, and thus avoid indigestion. A wife’s thoughtfulness is often very far-reaching.

Meanwhile Hugh had marched away in great wrath from his friend and benefactor. A man in a false position is apt to be unreasonable. Harroway should have taken it for granted he was acting honourably to Irene. Society generally ought to take it for granted. The irony of his friends’ kind suggestion was a red rag to his anger. Marry her! It was a palpitating vision of a paradise in this world for which he would cheerfully accept damnation in the next. Even were he not tied to Minna for life, and were free to ask Irene, sheer honour and loyalty forbade him to go to her with protestations of passion. She did not love him in the common way of women. Thus there was a double barrier to the fool wish of that composite fool

Idols

society! And the maddening part of it was the impossibility of saying the words and bringing forward the proofs to convince it of its folly.

If he had loved her loyally through her married life, he loved her now with a new reverence. A new sacredness had arisen in his conception of his attitude toward her, such as had not hitherto invested his thoughts of women, and her influence had made itself felt in his work-a-day life. He had vowed he would never again plead in a criminal court, and had kept his vow. He was struggling to carve out a career in chancery practice. He had to supplement his income with irregular journalism. It was a hard battle; but he was not a beaten man. If he needed stimulus there were flashing goads in Irene's eyes.

On this evening he had arranged to dine with her at seven. It had just struck the hour when he arrived at her flat in Kensington. Jane, who opened the door, greeted him with a smile, hung up his overcoat, and showed him into the drawing-room. Irene threw down her book beside her on the sofa, and rose in her quick, impulsive fashion.

"At last. You are two minutes late. They have been tedious."

He looked at her, his eyes strangely blinded. The gradation from her customary laughing tenderness into something tenderer had been imperceptible. Perhaps to her as much as to him.

Idols

"A welcome like that is sweet after a day's work," he said. "And I haven't seen you for forty-eight hours."

"Very dull ones, I assure you. I have striven to improve them. A harder task than the busy insect's."

"Gathering honey out of blue-books?"

He indicated a couple of government publications lying open, face downwards, on an arm-chair.

"Horrid things!" cried Irene, pouncing on them and stowing them beneath a chiffonnier on the other side of the room. "I am tired of them. Let us be happy this evening, and forget their existence."

A glance of surprised questioning met her. Usually she was eager to talk of her pursuits.

"I have a great need of happiness, you know, Hugh," she continued, rather defiantly. "I could suck up an ocean of it, like an infinite sponge."

Then she laughed, and turning away to her writing table swept the loose sheets of manuscript lying on it into a drawer.

"You see, I'm beginning to cultivate nerves."

He watched her somewhat anxiously. She was looking pale this evening, and her grey eyes were more lustrous than usual. A faint pearl-coloured gown unrelieved by a spot of brighter colour accentuated the delicacy of her face.

"You are overworking yourself; Renie. Need-

Idols

lessly. You want a holiday—a change to sunshine and blue skies.”

“I want my dinner,” said Irene. “Here it is.”

Jane made formal announcement. They went into the little dining-room, where the table was daintily set with flowers, bright silver and glass.

“You are wrong,” she said quietly, as she helped the soup. “I am not overworking myself. I sleep like a top and haven’t an ache or pain in my body.”

“Still a change of air would do you no harm.”

She assented with idle interest. Where should she go? He suggested Spain. Zaraws, not far from St. Sebastian, on the Bay of Biscay; fairly secure from English; warm, picturesque, with the comforts of a civilised hotel. From personal acquaintance he launched forth into glowing description. The golden sands and the purple seas of the south. The olive gardens with their shivering silver and green. The dark-eyed Basques. The wealth of sun and colour. Irene leant her elbow on the table and her eyes dwelt softly on him.

“Does it please you?” he asked.

“The way you talk of it does. I would sooner have that. It does me more good. You always speak as if the subject of the moment were the one interest of your life. I wish you had a parliamentary career before you.”

Idols

He laughed. "That is dangerously near satire, Renie."

"Women only use satire when they want to hurt, and to hurt deeply," she said. "I want to—" She stopped, embarrassed.

"What?" he asked.

Her eyes fell before his. She made a pretence of eating. Jane entered with the next course. They discussed the weather, until she had retired.

"What could I do to make your life happier, Renie?" he asked. A futile question; yet men will continue to put it.

"What can I do to make *yours* happier? That is the all-important point to me."

"Nothing," he said in a low voice. "This is the happiest time of my life."

"There is nothing I could do—beyond asking you to dinner?"

"Nothing," he repeated. "If there were, I should tell you."

"You have only to ask," said Irene.

Woman could say no more. There was a short silence. Hugh understood—yet did not divine. The inner man fell at her feet, blessing her for her sweet graciousness of surrender. He was fine enough to perceive that she was grateful to him for restraining expression of the love long known to her, and that her words were meant to relieve him of the obligation to

Idols

which he had bound himself. But it was divine and tender charity. Nothing more. It was her way to reward royally out of proportion to services rendered.

"Life is a queer tangle," he remarked after a while.

"The art of unravelling it is the art of living. But one must hold the master thread."

"The master thread is work," said Hugh, forcing his tone to lightness.

"No."

"What is it, then?"

She did not answer. A little involuntary sigh fluttered her bosom.

"I wish I could put you back into your bright circle, Renie," he said, putting his own interpretation upon her mood. With Harroway's words fresh in his memory, his heart grew heavy.

"Yes, I miss my friends," she replied absently.

The talk dropped a little. She stayed with him while he smoked his cigarette, and then they went into the drawing-room. Hugh drew her chair to the fire, set a footstool for her feet, and placed a cushion behind her head. She thanked him shyly, trying to keep back a rush of thoughts. Gerard had never done such a thing for her in his life. Suddenly tears came into her eyes. Hugh bent over her, in some concern.

"My poor Renie."

She smiled as she wiped the tears away.

Idols

"The past sometimes hurts," she said. "But the present is healing it."

Again their talk languished, strangely lacking spontaneity. The breath of a new influence was hovering round them. At last Hugh rose to go.

"You look so tired that I won't keep you up any longer. God bless you for what you have said this evening."

She turned her head aside quickly and began to tremble a little. He could see the flush rising on the sweet contours of her temples, and losing itself in the shadow of her hair. "Then you did understand?" she murmured.

"Yes. But it was the angel and not the woman that spoke," he said rather huskily. "Besides, I could never ask you for what I did not feel myself free to accept."

She turned and faced him, looking him bravely in the eyes, while the flush flamed into scarlet.

"You will never think—as other men might think——?"

Her insinuation flashed for the first time through his mind—that she was urging him to marry her for social reasons.

"Good God, no!" he said. "Don't speak of it."

A moment afterwards they parted, and Hugh rushed down the stairs with his temples buzzing.

CHAPTER XIX

HER divine and selfless nature had made the offer. He had unequivocally refused it. The incident was therefore closed. Ostrich-wise he hid his head from its consequent influences in their relations, and regarded them as non-existent. That was the humorous aspect of his moral attitude. On the other hand he believed in himself and in his strength of will to withstand temptation. He knew that Irene was too strong and proud a woman to desire marriage with him as a social rehabilitation. In fact, the thought insulted her. He could not conceive that she loved him, wanted him for her own sake. As for himself, he could set his teeth and defy the heart-hunger. Should she speak again, he would disclose to her the fact of his marriage. He hoped that no necessity would arise.

Some weeks passed. They saw each other frequently, but there were many little flaws in the frankness of their intercourse to which he wilfully blinded himself. There were times when a chance sweetness of look or phrase set his heart beating madly; when, also, a chance wistfulness in her manner brought back vividly the full meaning of Harroway's offer, and made

Idols

him curse its futility. After a while she appeared to grow less cheerful. She would regard him with a little tender air of surprised reproach, which he attributed to the weariness of her lot. One Saturday night they walked from Bedford Square, where the Cahusacs lived, to Hyde Park Corner, before they took the omnibus for High Street, Kensington. In spite of the bright evening they had just spent, the walk was singularly silent. Towards the end she leaned on his arm, feeling tired. Involuntarily he drew her closer to him, but the constraint grew greater. In the omnibus he asked her whether she felt down-hearted. She alleged a headache. His ready sympathy sprang to her. Why had she walked all that distance? To see whether exercise would remedy it, she replied.

"Life is weighing upon you, Renie," he said, as he parted from her at her door.

"It is Hugh—a little," she answered. And the stone-staircase was not too dimly lighted for him not to perceive once more the curious, reproachful surprise in her glance.

He went away full of passionate remorse for what he had brought upon her. Her life was crushing her. A desperate remedy flashed through his mind. A terrible temptation. Yet keenly sensitive to that within him which concerned Irene, he perceived an ugly leering selfishness beneath the surface, and he put the temptation from him.

Idols

Meanwhile the series of articles over the signature "Delta" had attracted attention. Her identity leaked out. A paragraph appearing in the literary notes of one journal, and copied by several others, revealed it to the general public. In these modern days a pseudonym is as effective a disguise as a jacket worn inside out. She was disturbed in mind, dreading publicity. "Delta" had become as soiled a name as "Irene Merriam." Would not that lessen the influence of her work? Men would pass her articles by with a contemptuous shrug, and her appeals would be unheeded. To cry in the wilderness is task enough; to cry in a voice scorned by the few stragglers who hear, would have depressed the Baptist himself.

Then there came a day, shortly after her walk from Bedford Square with Hugh, when Jane brought her a gentleman's card bearing a name with which she was unfamiliar and a pencilled legend—"Women's Democratic League." She decided to see the visitor. A red-haired man with dubious linen and persuasive manners was admitted. She motioned him to a chair. He put his hat on the ground and explained his mission. Her articles had been so appreciated by the League that he had been deputed to invite her to lecture on behalf of that body. Irene was gratified but alarmed. Writing was one thing, lecturing another.

"I am sorry to refuse," she told the man, "but I have given up my little attempts at public life."

Idols

"That is a great pity, Mrs. Merriam. So many would welcome you back again. Do think over it. We can promise you a most enthusiastic audience. In fact, we might scheme out a short tour—all expenses paid and a handsome percentage on the takings. Your name would draw."

"You are mistaken," said Irene frankly. "Besides——"

"Oh, no," he interrupted quickly. "Your name is so well known—all over England. People would run to see you. Putting things on a commercial basis, so long as people come, their object doesn't matter."

Then Irene saw. For a moment, she gasped for breath. It was a calm proposal to make capital out of her notoriety. She rose and pressed the electric bell by her side, and turned upon him with flaming cheeks, and anger in her eyes.

"How dare you!" she cried.

The man took up his hat and broke into apologies. Jane appeared at the door.

"Show this person out," said Irene.

The democratic delegate retired ignominiously. Irene walked about the room, mechanically rearranging perfectly orderly arranged trifles, in the feminine way, dazed with wrath and humiliation. A short while afterwards, she did not know whether to rage against the abandoned cynicism of the proposal, or to laugh cynically at her own touching simplicity in the matter

Idols

of her former mental disquietude. In the midst of her anger arrived Elinor Cahusac on a flying call. Irene related the scene midway between tears and laughter. Mrs. Cahusac listened, sympathised, and, as soon as she reached her home, informed her husband of the insult that had been offered to Irene. And the next afternoon Cahusac, meeting Hugh by chance in the Strand, repeated his wife's story. An hour later Hugh was ringing furiously at Irene's door.

He found her sitting before the fire, with her writing-board on her lap. She raised startled eyes as he entered, laid his hat and stick on a table, and came to her side. She rose instinctively, leaving the board on the broad arm of the chair.

"Is what Cahusac tells me true, Renie?" he cried impetuously—"about that scoundrel insulting you yesterday?"

"I told Elinor something."

"And why did you not tell me last evening?"

"What use would there be in worrying you for nothing?" she replied evasively.

The light of the chandelier beneath which she was standing fell upon her averted face. The heaviness of her eyelids struck him; a crumpled ball of a handkerchief in her hand confirmed the betraying lids.

"And I come in unexpectedly and find you crying. You would not have told me the cause of that either."

Idols

"I have no right to worry you," she replied again.

"I wish to God I had the right to make you," he cried passionately, goaded by the insult offered her and by the evidence of her unhappiness.

"I don't think you do," she said in a low voice.

"I?" he queried.

Taking her by the wrist, he impulsively led her to the sofa and seated her by his side.

"This state of things cannot go on," he said harshly. "We are losing each other. I must explain. I will tell you about that woman, the one you know of."

Irene started away from him, as though the word were a lash.

"Is she between us? I don't want to hear a breath of her. I won't listen. What is she to me? Let us continue in the old way."

"We have come to the end of it," said Hugh.

"Do you love her?" she asked, fiercely.

"I have every reason to hate and despise her," said Hugh between his teeth. "You know very well that I love you with every fibre of my being."

Irene held him with her eyes. The few seconds seemed an incalculable time.

"And you know that I love you with all my heart and soul. So why will you not take me?" she said slowly.

Idols

He sprang to his feet.

"You love me—like that?"

The great wonder of glory that suddenly held his soul in awe, shone from his eyes, dazzling and confusing the woman, whose own lowered tremulously.

"Like that?" he repeated. "Say it again."

"I have told you too much already," she murmured. And then the woman's tears and tenderness all gushed forth, and she raised swimming eyes to him.

"Oh, Hugh dear, why did you make me tell you?"

In a moment she was sobbing in his arms, clinging to him, yielding herself to the ecstatic solace. Half shamed, she drooped her head and hid her face against his breast, and he held her tightly to him. Then there was a long great silence. The woman's heart drank thirstily of the intoxicating flood of happiness. But the man's burned white hot in the stress of agonising conflict. She could not see his drawn face. His short sharp breathing only told her of emotion too deep for words. Its pain did not pierce through her bliss. Her fair head rested contentedly against the molten furnace. Through such brief, fierce, soul-scorching fires come the tremendous decisions of life.

"Will you marry me, Irene?" he said at last.

She moved her head for a moment, like a child. Then she raised it, and drew herself gently from him.

Idols

"Do you know why I was crying—a woman is a fool, Hugh dear—when you came in?"

"Why?"

"I thought you did not want me. It was bitter. A turning of the tables."

"Since when have you loved me?" he asked.

"I don't know. Always, perhaps," she replied, turning away. "It's a question you must never ask me."

/ How or when it had come she knew not. What woman does? Often she may point back to some spring morning of the heart, when love burst into blossom, and say: "Then I knew." But she is aware that the petals had long lain delicately folded in the sheaths, and is dimly reminiscent of growth and expansion. To the how and when of that she can return no answer. But Irene looked back and found strange tendernesses working darkly through all the years. Could it have been possible——? Her womanhood shrank frightened from the suggestion—then tiptoed, with held breath, up to it again. The union of the two men in her affection had dated from the first day they had spoken to her on the P. & O. steamer, and it had existed continuously until one broke away, leaving the other untouched. Hugh's loyal love for her had been one of the inner glories of her life. She had felt it to be the complement of Gerard's. So much was clear. But was her own

Idols

affection for Hugh complementary to her love for Gerard? Could her feelings towards Gerard have maintained their homogeneousness without the other influence? Was it, in brief, an inextricable dual love? She found no answers. All was a mystery—like the colour of an opal, with an elusive white of shame. Yet no thought of longing unsatisfied had ever tinged the purity of her wifely worship. There her soul was free from doubt. Yet again, on the other hand, Hugh had ever been inexpressibly dear to her. The cult of their idealised brotherhood had further fused these complex emotions together, thereby rendering the mystery more inscrutable.

“I can never tell you,” she repeated. “Never. Oh, Hugh dear, I have been so lost and lonely.”

His arm closed protectingly round her.

“Forgive me, dear,” she said. “I once thought you a weak man—perhaps that is why I did not love you at first. But now I know that you are strong—and I need your strength.”

That was the deep key-note of her happiness. Once she had compared the two men; rock and shifting sand. Idolatry had inverted her vision. It had been shifting sand and rock. She was safe on the rock now. Often, lately, had she looked back, in sickened wonder, upon that idolatry. The whole of her true life with Gerard had revealed itself: the dull taciturnity she had revered as strength, the ungra-

Idols

cious compliances she had raised to tendernesses or noble actions, the hundred faults she had transfigured to virtues. In vain she looked for one sparkling deed, one act of unselfishness, one spontaneous loving caress that she had treasured, even one proof of more than common mental attainment. In the very work-a-day business of life he had deceived her; his practice at the bar was worth little or nothing. She was stupefied at her own delusion.

But now she was safe. Now she looked back upon Hugh's life, and saw it filled with innumerable deeds of devotion and loyalty. His brilliance in the world was a matter not of blind faith but of direct testimony. His heroism had not been potential but actually displayed. Twice she had known him to face death. Once to save his friend's life. Once to save a woman's honour. Of the latter she was convinced. Convinced also of his impeccability as regards the woman. On the part this creature had played in his life she was too proud to speculate. He did not love her. That was certain. It sufficed the hungry woman. The strong soul refused to seek further. Yes, she was safe; the foundations of her life laid on the living rock. The overwhelming happiness of it!

She stood before him radiant. A black silk blouse, with frilled upstanding collar lightly caressing her throat, heightened the glow in her face. He had studied its infinite variety of expression, and knew it

Idols

in all its phases, enthusiasm, anger, sorrow, gentleness. To-day it was a revelation. To only one man in her life can a woman reveal the full glory of her soul and sex. The last shreds of his compunction were swept away by a mighty wave of pride.

"I would have gone through hell-fire to win you," he said.

She smiled, happily unconscious of his allusion, and replied in tender raillery.

"You have only had to go through the hollow form of asking me. Was it so hard?"

"I should never have asked you to marry me out of pity."

"I knew that," she replied. "And now—are you sure that you will be happy?"

"Happy?" he echoed.

He laughed, walked across the room, back again, and ran his fingers through his hair. The happiness began to intoxicate him. He stopped before her and took both her hands.

"Do you know what a man's love is?" he cried.

He paced his room that night in a hot fever of joy, with pulses throbbing and nerves vibrating. Irene's love was his at last, his for ever, to change life from an ill-weeded garden to glittering fields of an unimagined heaven beyond hyperbole of speech. To preserve the ineffable gift, he would take upon himself

Idols

the burden of a hundred crimes. In this hour of rapture the burden of the one he had resolved to commit sat lightly on his shoulders. She ran no risk. The secret of the marriage was safe. It had lain buried in the Brighton Registrar's office through all the lurid publicity of the trial. Minna would keep it beyond the shadow of a doubt. Anna Cassaba was bound body and soul to Minna. And then the crime was for the adored one's greater happiness. It would lift from her the crushing weight of social loneliness. It would flood her life with the passion of a man's worship. The vision of the full harmonious days to come rose up before him. He laughed aloud. There are times when a man feels strong enough to defy Fate.

CHAPTER XX

MINNA had rushed to London, which she loathed, from Nice, which she adored, and was occupying a suite of apartments in the Hotel Métropole. And the cause of her journey was Hugh; wherefore she regarded him with feelings of more than usual vindictiveness. His letter announcing his marriage with Irene had thrown her into a violent rage. She had stormed at her French maid, cast herself on her bed and wept, and then gone off to Monte Carlo, where she did her best to compromise herself with an Austrian banker who had been, for the past fortnight, most assiduous in his attentions. The necessitous gentlewoman whom, for shrewd social reasons, Minna employed as her chaperon and companion had chosen to be shocked. There had been a scene.

"My conscience won't allow me to pass such things by without remonstrance," the lady had said.

"I don't pay you to have a conscience," Minna had replied rudely. "I possess one too many of my own."

"It is an outrage on common decency," said the lady, who had a spirit as yet unbroken by servitude.

Idols

Whereupon Minna had dismissed her on the spot, and that evening found herself unchaperoned. Now, she had taken a little villa on the Cimiez Road, with a cool white loggia and tessellated floors. To live there in maiden seclusion was out of the question. To provide herself with the excitement that she craved, without some nominal protectress of her youth and beauty, would be to rank herself as unclassed. But she had not the faintest desire to set society's skirts tightly drawn when she passed by, as did many fair and solitary owners of pretty villas between Cannes and St. Remo. Her dearly won fortune could buy her much more satisfactory delights. In a word, a chaperon was essential. For a whole month she sought far and wide. She offered lavish terms. Hundreds applied. But the ladies without conscience lacked influence. The influential chaperons seemed to be steeped in the crassest respectability. At last a paragon came within her horizon, a Mrs. Delamere, the widow of a colonel of artillery, a woman of the world.

"In the course of an incided life," she wrote, "I have found that discretion is the better part of virtue."

The distorted epigram had brought Minna post-haste to London. She came, saw, conquered. Mrs. Delamere agreed to deposit her conscience with her bankers, and to accompany Minna southward, with the briefest possible delay.

Idols

It was five o'clock in the afternoon. Minna threw herself down on a couch and turned over the pages of a novel. She had just returned from a solitary drive in the Park, where she had not seen one familiar face. She hated London. It recalled a past life of miseries. The novel fell to the ground as she went over the tale of them, counted for the fiftieth time since her arrival, two days before. She had seen no one but Mrs. Delamere. In a moment of utter boredom, a vestige of gratitude had suggested a visit to the Bebros. But she could not face the ghosts of the horrors of that house. The sight of the dull, coarse, kindly faces would put back the hand of time, and set her again among the devils. A faint back-wash of the old hysteria met her at the thought. So she remained in solitary state in the gorgeous hotel, chafing at its dulness.

Presently she rose and walked with aimless unrest about the room. She rang for her maid.

"Go downstairs and get me a couple of stalls for the Haymarket this evening."

The neat French girl retired with the order. Minna went to the window and drummed against the pane, gazing abstractedly at the busy embankment crossing just below, the train creeping over Hungerford Bridge, the flaring posters against the Avenue Theatre.

"How hateful everything is," she said to herself. But she remained by the window for occupation's

Idols

sake. Then Justine, the maid, entered. There were no stalls. They had telephoned. If Mademoiselle would like a box——

“Oh, yes,” said her mistress, irritably. “That will do.”

She had invited Mrs. Delamere to dinner and theatre. An irrational impulse of politeness had caused her to leave to her guest the choice of entertainment. Mrs. Delamere had expressed a desire to see a much talked-of piece at the Haymarket before her expatriation. Minna had a foreboding of depression. The Empire or the Gaiety would have better suited her mood; also a bottle of champagne afterwards in the company of some amusing men. As the prospect interested her but slightly, she had characteristically delayed to get tickets till the last moment. She looked at her watch. Half-past five. She waited by the window until Justine returned with the box-tickets.

“I’ll come and dress,” said Minna; “it will be something to do.”

“It is true that one does not amuse oneself in London,” said Justine, answering the implication.

“It is the most odious place on the earth; I sigh for Nice.”

“I also, Mademoiselle. But Nice will be dull when we return.”

“We’ll shut up the villa and go to Aix-les-Bains for the Russian season.”

Idols

"I adore the Russians," cried Justine with conviction.

"Have you known many?" asked Minna sarcastically.

"When one knows one thoroughly, one knows them all," said Justine.

The soothing charm of a long and protracted toilette enlivened by Justine's somewhat intimate account of the one Russian whom she knew thoroughly, beguiled the time and restored Minna to good humour. When she left Justine's hands, adorned in the most fascinating of Paris dresses, with her diamond star in her dark hair, and looked at herself in the pier-glass, she was almost happy. She was young, and to most eyes, especially her own, captivatingly beautiful. The ravages that the past ordeal had made in her beauty had been repaired by time. Her lips were as ripely pouting, her dark eyes as slumberous, her lazy lids as sensuous, as when she had first deliberately woven their glamour around Hugh, long, long ago. Furthermore, she had ripened into maturer womanhood.

"Mademoiselle is ravishing," said Justine.

Minna sighed. "And to think that it's all going to be wasted to-night—positively wasted."

"Mademoiselle will command the admiration of the whole house."

Minna laughed contemptuously. What would be the gratification of that?

Idols

"It would please me enormously if I were in the place of Mademoiselle," said Justine.

A little later Minna descended with her guest to the great dining-room. Mrs. Delamere was a faded, aristocratic looking woman, with an aquiline nose and a perfect taste in dress. She looked at her charge critically, noticed her unabashed and somewhat inviting acceptance of admiring glances, and imperceptibly shrugged her shoulders. Rather than linger in the Bloomsbury boarding-house, where for the past year she had been hiding her fallen fortunes, she would have undertaken to chaperon the Unmentionable Person of Babylon herself. Meanwhile she intended to enjoy her dinner.

The crowded room, the buzz of conversation, and the expensive wines completed Minna's sense of comfort.

"I am glad that you prefer champagne *extra*," said Mrs. Delamere, after the first appreciative sip. "So many women go for Veuve Cliquot, when they can."

"Yes, and make men afraid to dine with them," said Minna. "I felt sure that your taste and mine would coincide. Yet I had to educate myself up to it."

"The education will not be thrown away," said Mrs. Delamere.

"Men are beasts," said Minna. "There is scarcely one who can stand against an appeal to his

Idols

own little pet sensuality. But there is no amusement or excitement in life without men—and so it is worth while studying their sensualities.”

Mrs. Delamere assented with a polite gesture.

“Do you think I am too cynical for my age?” asked Minna in her languorous voice.

“Age is a matter of experience rather than of years.”

“Well—too cynical for my experience?”

Mrs. Delamere pursed her thin lips in a smile.

“Some experience brings cynicism; some again brings truth. It all depends how you are affected.”

“But what is truth—to quote Pilate?” asked Minna. “I haven’t found it, either in myself or in any one else. To weave the most gratifying tissue out of lies—that’s the end of life. If I shock you, you had better tell me at once, Mrs. Delamere.”

“You look far too charming for any one to be shocked at you,” replied the chaperon indulgently.

“Thank you,” said Minna in high good humour.

Mrs. Delamere turned the conversation to the cosmopolitan society of foreign watering-places. She had a wide experience of men and things, and talked amusingly. Minna compared her approvingly with her prudish predecessor, and congratulated herself on her choice. The talk was so edifying that they lingered over their coffee, and when they reached their box at the theatre the first act had begun.

Idols

Except on the stage, all was dimness. The stalls, the dress-circle glimmered vaguely with the pale spots of faces and the broader splashes of light dresses. Minna sat on the stage side of the box and Mrs. Delamere opposite. The act failed to interest the girl, whose champagne-filled head craved amusement. Her nature, too, instinctively rebelled at earnestness of purpose and the suggestion of ideals. The foreshadowing of tragedy in the play depressed her. Her own soul was too dark to bear additional gloom with ease. She yawned, rested her elbow on the edge of the box, and looked fixedly at the stage, while she saw her own life, and pitied herself greatly. She was alone. Anna Cassaba had died suddenly three months ago. Now she was friendless, save for this paid woman next her, whom in her heart she despised. She brooded over her wrongs—over the last great insult her husband had heaped upon her. How she hated him! How dared he marry? Considering her passionate repudiation of all claims upon him, this was unreasonable. But if men and women were always guided by reason, life would be as emotional as the Binomial Theorem.

At last the curtain descended. The theatre sprang into light. Mrs. Delamere broke into well-modulated enthusiasm. She praised the acting.

"It all seems wooden compared with the French stage," replied Minna, pausing in the act of raising

Idols

an opera-glass. She turned, scanned the movements in the stalls. Suddenly she dropped the glass on her lap and remained staring, and grew very white.

"Take my salts," said Mrs. Delamere, quickly rising.

"Look there," cried Minna, unheeding. "There he is, standing up."

"Who?"

"Hugh Colman."

"The man who——?" said Mrs. Delamere with tactful aposiopesis.

Minna recovered, flushed, bit her lip angrily. She had almost betrayed herself.

"It gave a shock to see him," she explained, forcing a smile. "The last time was in such painful circumstances—the trial—my poor father."

Mrs. Delamere nodded sympathy, and looked with curious interest at Hugh's handsome face and haughty bearing.

"And there is the heroine of his romance with him, Mrs. Merriam. I know her by sight."

"They were married a month ago," said Minna, steadying her voice.

"They were both friends of yours, I believe."

"He was," said Minna.

At that moment, she saw his eyes, which had been idly wandering round the house, fix themselves with awful suddenness upon hers. Instinct warned her

Idols

of the danger of putting Mrs. Delamere on the scent of a mystery. She made Hugh an unmistakably cordial bow, to which he responded with grave courtesy. Then he sat down beside Irene. The conjuncture of the parties in so celebrated a trial did not pass unnoticed. A whispering here, followed by a glance, an opera-glass levelled there, indicated to Minna the fact of their recognition. Exaggerating the danger, she summoned the box-attendant and, borrowing a pencil, scribbled in German upon a bit of her programme: "Come and speak to me, to save appearances." The note despatched, she awaited events.

Hugh sat down by Irene, and hated to meet the love and trust in her clear eyes. It was the first time they had appeared together in public since their marriage, the first time either had been to a theatre since his arrest for Israel Hart's murder. It had been a small event in their lives, enjoyed in anticipation, and up to now enjoyed in realisation. They had held hands lover-wise during the act, under cover of the darkness, signalling emotions by little finger-pressures. He rode on the full tide of the past month's wondrous happiness. Now and then his mind wandered to the sheltered haven on the sweet Cornish coast where the all-fulfilling days of their honeymoon had been passed; where the woman, shyly revealing her inner tenderesses, seemed thereby to regain day by day the colour of her cheeks and the serenity of her brow. And his

Idols

thoughts flew forward to the journey home, to the strange new fact of not parting at the door, and walking back to his lonely rooms with his heart aching for wild impossibilities. He had risen with a laughing speech:

"I am going to delight myself by seeing how inferior all other women are to you."

And then his eyes had met those of Minna fixed upon him like a fate.

"Strange we should see her on our first appearance," said Irene.

"She is looking remarkably well," he returned, realising and hating the banality of the remark. Then he was silent. Irene noticed a constraint.

"Never mind if it calls up cruel associations, dear. The past troubles have brought the present happiness. You must always remember that."

"Could I ever forget?" he said.

"She has improved in looks," said Irene, with a glance at the box. "The last time I saw her, poor thing, she was terribly pulled down. I don't think I ever told you. It was on the awful evening of the first day of the trial. She suddenly appeared at our house, and, before she could speak, was stricken dumb with hysteria. We had to send her back to her friends. Strange, wasn't it?"

"Very strange," said Hugh, in a low voice.

What could have been the intention of her visit?

Idols

To confess? He dared not show the agitation that the story caused him. He rose brusquely, with a desire to escape for a moment from the torture of his present position. Its falseness stung his impatience. A little bald-headed man two rows of stalls off, who was looking with curiosity at the hero of the *cause célèbre*, suddenly met Hugh's glance and curled up like a shrivelled leaf into his stall. But Hugh had been quite unconscious of the bald-headed man's interest.

"Why don't you go and smoke a cigarette?" said Irene.

As he turned towards her, he saw the tender truthful love in her face, and he called himself a villain for deceiving her. But it was for her happiness. Indubitably. Still the presence there of the other woman shed a ghastly light upon his honour rooted in dishonour. And Irene's simple statement of Minna's mysterious visit, whose baffled intention he could not but surmise, added a grimmer irony to the situation. Before he could reply to Irene, however, the attendant had edged her way to him with Minna's note. His brow darkened as he read the words. He could not refuse. Besides, Irene had heard the attendant's enquiry and explanation.

"I will go and speak to her if you don't mind," he said.

"Of course you must," said Irene. "She will be glad to see you."

Idols

Hugh looked at his watch. There were still ten minutes before the curtain rose. There would be time for a brief interview. The briefer the better.

He made his way along the line of stalls and ran up the stairs to Minna's box. She met him outside, in the carpeted and quiet passage, and walked a step or two past the door of her box, so as to be beyond the earshot of Mrs. Delamere. She held out her hand to him with an air of contemptuous defiance.

"So you have committed bigamy?" she remarked.

"To put it bluntly, I have," replied Hugh. "You scarcely summoned me to give yourself the pleasure of telling me that."

"Who knows?" said Minna, with an insolent up-sweep of her lazy lashes.

"Have you anything to say against it?"

"Oh, dear, no. You got my letter, didn't you? You can have as many wives as the late Brigham Young, if you like."

Hugh bowed ironically. It was like her to meet tragic issues with vulgarity.

"Tell me," he said, with a quick change of manner, "why did you go to Mrs. Merriam's on that evening during the trial?"

The question was so abrupt and the incident for the moment so far from her thoughts that she gave a little gasp of surprise and the blood came into her cheeks. She drooped her eyes, stole a surreptitious glance at

Idols

him, and seeing his face very stern, hardened her heart and laughed contemptuously.

"The thing got on my nerves, I suppose—you don't fancy I contemplated murdering you in cold blood? I thought your dear, true friend Mr. Merriam might help me. Wasn't I a silly little fool?"

"I am glad you had one moment of compunction," said Hugh.

"I have sincerely repented of it since, I assure you. But we need not talk of unpleasant things. All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds. I see you are amply consoled, while I——"

"And you?"

"I console myself, too," she answered insolently.

He regarded her pityingly; was silent for a moment. Then he said in a kinder tone:

"Why speak like this? I should be happy to feel that you had made an effort to save me. For I have judged you harshly. If you tried to act loyally towards me, as I tried to act towards you, the fact will save us from hating one another."

"Will it?" she echoed. "My dear man, you can't possibly conceive how I hate you."

"Very well, then. We'll remain the best of enemies. Are you staying long in London?"

"Till the day after to-morrow. I am afraid I shall not have the pleasure of asking you to call on me."

Idols

"I regret it extremely," replied Hugh. "And now that I believe the curtain is up, I will say good-bye."

"Won't you sit through the act in our box?" asked Minna. "It will be difficult to get back to your—other wife."

He turned on his heel and walked away. She looked back at him until the curve of the passage hid him from her view, and then entered her box.

With muttered apologies to disturbed stall occupants Hugh regained his place by Irene. She slipped her hand, as before, into his, and whispered a welcome. His grasp grew tight as his heart swelled within him. Oh, God, it was good to have her safe and secure! But the spell of the play had lost its power. When the curtain fell again, he was scarcely conscious of what had passed. It had fallen on a highly dramatic situation. Irene gave the little sigh of relieved tension, and turned to him, her face lit with the afterglow of kindled emotion.

"You are enjoying it, dearest?" he said.

"Oh, yes. And you?"

"I am beside you, Renie. That is all I want in this world."

The answer contented her. She whispered a foolish word, her head near his. Instinctively he raised his eyes to Minna's box, and saw her staring down at him with the hard, ugly look upon her face that he had known so well in days past.

Idols

"I am afraid that poor girl is not happy," said Irene, following his glance. "Isn't it strange, Hugh dear, that from the very first, I always wanted to lighten her lot? What a meddlesome creature she would think me if she knew!"

She drove knives into the man. In what estimation would she hold him, if he told her his and that girl's story? He was no hero in his own eyes; in hers he day by day perceived, with an indescribable mingling of pain and pride, that he was. It was her nature to exalt any one she loved on a pinnacle of greatness. He had married her, allowing her to remain in ignorance, honestly, according to his lights; for the sake of her welfare alone. Now, for the first time, he trembled for himself.

"Don't be sad, dear," she said after a while. "I can look back on it all so calmly—as if it had happened in a prior state of existence. And so must you."

"Love is the god that works all healing," he replied. And the sincerity of his faith comforted him.

The object of Irene's pity soon withdrew into the shadow of the box, and plunged into flippant and bitter dialogue with Mrs. Delamere. The newspaper account of the scandal gave her scope for much mordant criticism of Hugh and Irene. It was a savage pleasure to tear their reputation to shreds, heap on invective and opprobrium, invent past meannesses and dishonours and treacheries.

Idols

"You seem to dislike him very much," remarked Mrs. Delamere, smiling.

"Who wouldn't, considering his record of infamy?" replied Minna, her rich, deep voice turning, as it always did when she was angered, to harshness.

The smile flickered inscrutably around Mrs. Delamere's thin lips.

"I don't know," she said. "I can forgive the woman. I should think most women with whom he has come in contact have been ready to throw themselves away upon him. He is a splendid looking animal."

"Do you think women are beasts like men?"

"There's not much to choose between them," replied Mrs. Delamere.

The last act began; Mrs. Delamere gave herself up to the stage. Minna leant on the edge of the box and brooded over the two figures side by side, just distinguishable in the chequered dimness of the stalls. When the piece was over, she hurried her companion out of the theatre, and parted from her at the door. A cab quickly took her to the Métropole. She went straight into her bedroom and ordered a small bottle of champagne and some biscuits, which she consumed while Justine aided her to undress.

"Has Mademoiselle well amused herself?" asked Justine.

"Don't chatter in that irritating way," said Minna

Idols

snappishly. So Justine concluded her operations in silence, and retired at the earliest opportunity.

Minna wrapped her dressing-gown around her and lay back in a chair, with the last half glass of champagne beside her. And gradually the sensuousness faded from her face, and her eyes grew haunted by trouble and her lips worked nervously. Thus she remained rigid, save for her lips and swelling bosom, for a long time. At last, in a vehement whisper:

“Yes, I hate him,” she said.

CHAPTER XXI

FOR a while the sun of his happiness declined and the shadow of his danger rested upon Hugh. But presently it was noontide again, and, after the manner of men, he forgot the danger. The months passed and grew into years, and a wonderful joy came into Irene's sky and lit, with a new worship, her love for Hugh. But Minna lived in the gloom of a disastrous life.

Three years had passed.

Her high-heeled shoes came down with a click upon the tiled floor of the loggia at every swing forward of her American rocking-chair. As Mrs. Delamere's nerves had been tried of late, she rose, after some wincing, and prepared to enter the drawing-room. Three years' chaperonage of Minna had brought their wear and tear upon the system; and Minna's character had decidedly not softened. They had, however, remained excellent friends, and had formed a cold, cynical attachment to each other. The pulling up of a carriage in the court-yard below drew Mrs. Delamere to the balustrade.

Idols

"If you are really going to Monte Carlo, you had better make haste, or you will miss the 10.55. There is the carriage."

Minna stopped her rocking, and lay back in the chair in a lazy attitude.

"I wish I hadn't told Boissy I would come."

"So do I. He's a bit of a cad. It won't do you any good to placard yourself about with him."

"Because he tells improper stories?"

"On a fortnight's acquaintance," said Mrs. Delamere.

"Well, he's the only man I have met who can tell you them without making you feel bound to blush. Blushing is a nuisance. In fact everything in the world is a nuisance. I wish I were out of it."

"You would scarcely find your way to a better one," remarked the elder lady suavely.

"Who knows?" said Minna. "This is pretty bad. Here all the virtuous are deadly dull and despise me. All those who seek me out and amuse me are vicious and vulgar. I hate the sight of Boissy."

"Don't you think you had better spend a quiet day here, for a change—send a telegram to Boissy?"

"Oh, lord! I should go crazy if I sat here doing nothing all day. It is punishment for my sins, I suppose."

"Do as you like, my dear," said Mrs. Delamere.

"Only, if you go, keep your wits about you."

Idols

"I can command the services of better looking animals than Boissy, if I want to compromise myself," retorted Minna. "He looks as if he came out of the Bon Marché. But he'll give me the best *déjeuner* in Monte Carlo."

"It is getting late, Mademoiselle," said Justine, appearing on the loggia with an anxious face. Minna rose sighing, and followed the maid indoors. A short while afterwards, Mrs. Delamere saw her charge, attired in a daffodil-yellow dress and a showy straw hat, a wilderness of bows and flowers, drive off buttoning her long gloves.

"She is overdoing it," she murmured to herself, as she kissed the tips of her fingers to Minna. "She will be wearing her diamonds in the daytime next. I'm glad I'm not a disappointed Jewess."

The Vicomte de Boissy, a short young man, with a small curled black moustache, a bad mouth, and somewhat dissipated eyes, dressed in a striped flannel suit and carrying a gold-knobbed malacca, met Minna as she alighted on the platform of the pretty little Monte Carlo station. He welcomed her with many compliments. She was ravishing. He scarcely dared hope she would do him the honour—even after her note had arrived. When he saw her descend from the railway carriage, he was dazzled. Minna looked at him with a little curl of disdain. Mrs. Delamere was right. He was a bit of a cad. And among

Idols

such had her lot fallen. A tall, clean, high-bred Englishman passed her by. He reminded her of Hugh.

"Women are fools, aren't they, M. de Boissy?" she said, as they emerged from the lift, and were walking across the square, bright with shops and cafés, towards the great white casino. "But I suppose you settled that for yourself at the age of ten."

"*Ma foi*, Mademoiselle," he replied, "there is no folly in being gracious to the most humble of your admirers."

"Oh! I wasn't at all thinking of my coming to lunch with you to-day. You need not flatter yourself."

He pleaded for mercy, adroitly turned the conversation, touched upon the scandalous chronicle of the place and made her laugh. They strolled through the building to the gardens. The weather was a perfect Riviera March, the grounds gay with bright dresses. Now and then an acquaintance passed, generally masculine and foreign, and bowed low to her. At which times her companion drew himself up and put on airs of importance, which Minna's half-closed eyes were shrewd to notice. At last she grew weary of walking. She asked him sharply whether they were ever going to lunch. He overwhelmed her with apologies, conducted her back through the casino and across the square to the Hôtel

Idols

de Paris, where he had reserved a table. There, amid the popping of champagne corks, the cosmopolitan chatter, the sparkle of the scene, and the *grivois* wit of her host, Minna threw off her sarcastic mood and jested recklessly. She was only capable of enjoyment now, when she had a little champagne in her head. It was natural that he should make love to her, with all the vulgarity of a cheap conqueror. Minna was used to the game. It pleased her to practise her arts of seduction. She knew that the caressing languor of her voice intoxicated the listener. He was the latest of innumerable wayfarers to whom she had held out the charmed cup. That she despised him added cynical zest. Besides, her own blood was stirred. A wanton woman does not turn men to swine for the mere fun of seeing them pigs. Boissy was in the slough of delight. His bad little face coarsened, his lips grew thick, his cheeks puffed up towards his eyes; he suggested a satyr debased by a civilised ancestry. In his mind, he was already bragging about his conquest to his friends.

"I wish I had dared entertain you in a private room," ~~he~~ said, leaning over the table.

"You would have sacrificed a great deal of gratification," replied Minna.

"How? We should have been alone."

"You would not have satisfied your vanity," said Minna. "You know that very well."

Idols

He protested. He was burning with adoration. She was cruel, like all her countrywomen.

"You have had enough good fortune for one day, I consider," she said.

"Ah, then, can I hope?"

"That's a thing forbidden to no one," she replied, looking at him through her eyelashes.

They had sat long over the meal. She expressed a desire for the outer air, and they strolled again together through the wonderful gardens. Behind them rose the great white palace of the casino, its marble balustrades and stairs and cupolas gleaming amidst the gorgeous vegetation. In front, the cobalt-blue Mediterranean meeting afar off the violet sky. On the left swept the fair Italian coast. On the right rose the black crag of Monaco, with its palace guarding the russet roofs of the little old town. Beneath them, terrace after terrace of greensward bedded with riotous profusion of flowers, broken by white parapets and flights of stairs. The scent of exotic flowers hung sensuously on the warm air.

"It is intoxicating like wine, or your beauty," said Boissy.

Minna shrugged her shoulders and glanced idly round.

"It's a pretty place. But one gets tired of it, as of most things. What's the time?"

"Half-past two," he replied, consulting his watch.

Idols

Mrs. Delamere would be there by half-past four. Then she could dismiss Boissy, of whom she was growing weary.

"Shall we sit down? One talks better."

He indicated a sheltered seat behind some great aloes, and led her thither. Minna commanded him to amuse her.

"I am too much in love."

"Then tell me the history of your last grand passion."

"I have only had one in my life."

He began to plead. Somehow the charm of enticing him had palled. He was such a vulgar little creature. She had heard all he had to say scores of times. She craved originality. The sublime conceit of the man, who was growing earnestly amorous, moved her disdain. Unscrupulous and conscious of degradation as she was, she nevertheless set a great value on herself. So she found entertainment in scathing ridicule. At last he lost his temper, threw his arms roughly round her and kissed her. She struggled from him, revolted, and struck him with all her might in the face. The brutality of the debased Gaul was aroused. The crimson mark flared across a livid cheek. Mad with rage he seized her wrists.

"Hallo!" said a sudden voice. "Drop that!"

A great, huge-limbed Englishman, dressed in loose

Idols

tweeds and a discoloured straw hat, stood before them. Boissy rose to his feet and struck an attitude.

"Monsieur—" he began.

But the new-comer took no notice of him. Instead, he looked with an air of startled recognition at Minna, and then lifted his hat.

"Miss Hart, I believe."

The surprise was great. She regarded him for some moments rather bewildered. He seemed to have dropped from the sky.

"Mr. Merriam!"

She collected herself quickly, rose, extended her hand. "I am so glad to see you again," she said, with an air of sincerity warranted by the occasion.

"Can I be of any service to you?"

"Oh, no, thanks," she replied lightly. And turning to Boissy, who stood by fuming, "I have the pleasure of thanking you for a most agreeable afternoon."

With a bow she dismissed him. He saluted with as good a grace as he could, including Gerard in his salute. But Gerard kept his hands in his pockets and watched him move away.

"What the deuce was he trying to do?" he asked.

"Make love to me, I suppose."

"Somewhat fiercely!"

"I had just struck him across the face."

"Are those the habits of these parts?"

Idols

"Oh, no. We are tame as a rule. I had just been lunching with him in the most civilised way."

"Perhaps I intruded," said Gerard.

"By no means. You came just in time, like the hero in a melodrama, to save maiden innocence from the clutches of the villain."

"May I enjoy the hero's privilege of consolation?"

"Within moderate limits," she said.

"I shall not be taking you from your friends?"

"Oh, no. I don't expect my friend, Mrs. Delamere, who lives with me, till half-past four. Till then I am a waif. Shall we sit? Or, no. Let us find a place somewhere else."

They walked together to the terrace below, and sat down facing the blue glory of the sea. On their way thither, she began to explain her presence in Monte Carlo. Nice had been her winter quarters for over three years. Her little villa was charming. If Mr. Merriam happened to be in Nice and would call at the Casa Benedetta, Mrs. Delamere and herself would be delighted to see him. Minna used her chaperon freely as a stalking horse of respectability.

"I shall be glad to come," said Gerard, with an appreciative glance at his companion. "I only landed in Europe yesterday, after a long absence, so I haven't found my bearings yet."

"Where have you been?"

"Until lately in South Africa. Hunting and gold

Idols

mining. Then I satisfied a schoolboy craze to see Madagascar. I don't want to see it again. Was down with fever most of the time, and took the first Messageries steamer to Marseilles. Then I thought I would put in a week or two here, before facing the wretched English spring."

"So you've been gold-mining," said Minna.

"Yes. Pretty successfully. Came in just before the boom."

"Made a fortune?"

"I've cleared a tidy bit."

"And you've come here to dispose of some of it?"

"At the tables? Not much. I am not that sort."

"I am afraid I am," said Minna, with a little sigh.

"Do you win or lose?" he asked.

"Last year I lost £6,000. This year I am winning. That's one reason why I live in these parts. The tables are a necessity to me. Monte Carlo, Aix-les-Bains, Ostend. That's my usual round."

"Don't you get rather sick of it?"

Minna looked mournfully out to sea, and clasped her hands in her lap. A pathetic attitude, somewhat out of harmony with the daffodil toilette and the unblushing hat.

"Pleasures would be tolerable were it not that one has to live so as to enjoy them," she said, after a pause.

Idols

"You have come by your pessimism early in life," he observed.

"I've not had much to encourage optimism, as you may be aware, Mr. Merriam."

"You had a bad bout, of course. So did we all," said Gerard. "But you have had time to recover."

"What are you going to do with your money?" she asked.

"Oh—I don't know. Buy an estate in my own county—Norfolk—and settle down to squiredom. Breed stock and preserve pheasants and that sort of thing."

"Will you be glad to get back?"

"I suppose so. Every one is, in a way. Wouldn't you?"

"I loathe England and all that it contains too much," she said with bitterness. "And I can't understand your wanting to return, either."

The first allusion to past events was followed by a short silence, during which each took mental stock of the other. The circumstances in which they had met had led naturally to a false assumption of friendliness. Now each was abruptly reminded of the very distant acquaintance that had existed between them, and of the strange part each had played in the other's life. Minna's expansion had been due to gratitude to him for having effectually rid her of Boissy, and to the novelty of talking to a big, lumbering Englishman.

Idols

Realising, however, who he was, she shrank within herself. A queer cold touch, which she could not explain, pressed around her heart. She had felt it before. Once, on the night, three years ago, when she had seen Hugh and Irene at the Haymarket Theatre. She moved slightly away from him with a sense of dislike. And yet his blunt, indifferent manner of speech pricked her vanity. He had thrown an admiring glance neither upon herself nor her costume. He should pay her some kind of homage whether she disliked him or not.

"It's funny my tumbling upon you like that," he remarked at last.

"We generally choose dramatic moments for our interviews," said Minna cynically.

"Yes, by Jove. The last one seems a long time ago, doesn't it?"

"Not to me," said Minna. "But then, you see, I haven't been gold-hunting at the ends of the earth. I've been living rapidly round a roulette-board. I suppose you know that the mystery of my poor father's death was cleared up."

"I saw it in the Cape papers. I was very glad."

There was another pause. Minna broke its discomfort by a casual allusion to the beauties of Monte Carlo.

"You have nothing like this in South Africa," she said.

Idols

"I wish we had," he replied. "If things were always as jolly as this, I should never want to get out of Europe."

He stretched himself out in a comfortable attitude, and looked contentedly at his companion. The talk drifted into generalities. Minna whetted upon him her satiric knife, a process which he found himself to be enjoying. The Jew money-lender's daughter, the rather common and silly little girl, whom he once despised, appeared to him in a totally new light. She had developed into a beautiful woman, with a cynical knowledge of the world and an alluring shamelessness of speech. Her manner was that of the insolently luxurious demi-mondaine; her great wealth transferred her to the sphere of the unassailed. In this dual, interfused light, she appeared a woman well worth the study of an idle afternoon. She was certainly a change from the fair frailties of South Africa. The puffs and frills and ribbons of the daring daffodil costume struck an elementary note of sex. He began to forget that she had mopped and mowed at him like an imbecile when they had last been face to face. She was a new acquaintance. He found himself losing the brusqueness of his earlier words, and dropping into the tone of deference her languid beauty seemed to command. When she arose, in the intention of going to meet Mrs. Delamere's train, and held out her hand for farewell, he offered his escort to the railway station,

Idols

with the air of a man begging for a favour. Minna was amused, somewhat interested; the originality of the situation gave a fillip to her mood. She assented graciously, and they proceeded through the casino grounds.

They arrived at the station a minute or two before the train. Mrs. Delamere stepped out on to the platform. Minna with a strange man at her heels was by no means an unusual sight. But when Minna introduced him as her old friend, Mr. Merriam, she arched her eyebrows involuntarily, and glanced at the girl, in whose eyes gleamed a spark of mockery.

"What has become of M. de Boissy?" she asked on their way to the casino.

"Oh, Mr. Merriam told him to go and play," laughed Minna.

CHAPTER XXII

AN idle, average sensual man, and an idle woman from whom wantonness emanates like a perfume, cannot meet each other every day for a couple of weeks without finding themselves progressing by leaps and bounds in mutual intimacy. The flesh speaks, the world is complaisant, and the devil leers beatifically. The attraction which Gerard first felt towards the transfigured money-lender's daughter developed quickly into a more vivid sentiment. Except that of an old club acquaintance whom he had run across in the gaming-rooms, he had no other society than Minna's in Monte Carlo. She became his occupation. The circle of friends to whom she introduced him aroused his British contempt. He was as much out of touch with the overdressed cosmopolitan ladies as with the excessively polite cosmopolitan men. He treated them all civilly enough, with a certain uncomfortable indifference, when he met them in her company, but avoided them studiously when he was alone.

Minna held a reception every Tuesday night at the Casa Benedetta. At first, Mrs. Delamere had tried to put her in the way of knowing good people. She

Idols

had worked and intrigued most sedulously, and had been successful in inducing a certain set to take up her charge. But seeing Minna play recklessly with all kinds of fire, they dropped her, out of regard for their own fingers. Minna called them Tartuffes and Peck-sniffs, uttering scornful doubts as to the honour of the men and the chastity of the women, whereupon Mrs. Delamere shrugged her shoulders and began to experiment upon the next strata of society. These, by turns, refusing to support Minna, she had come upon the riff-raff. And the riff-raff of Monte Carlo is a very curious and heterogeneous formation. No one knows its past or its future. The men have perfect manners, the women perfect complexions. The ones are worth the others.

Minna's receptions were brilliant enough. They were distinguished by animated conversation, excellent music, and irreproachable champagne. But to the stolid Philistine perception of Gerard Merriam there was an indefinable air of something wrong, such as strikes a guest at a perfectly well-conducted gathering at an expensive private lunatic asylum. When the ladies of the house were engaged with their guests, he lounged, hands in pockets, by the door leading on to the loggia, and surveyed the scene stonily. They were a damned lot, he murmured to himself; and added a couple of uncompromising Saxon vocables indicating the respective categories under which the

Idols

men and women fell. Disrepute, as practised by foreigners, is a tawdry and contemptible thing in respectable though immoral British eyes.

Thus he stood one Tuesday evening some three weeks after his meeting with Minna. The room was brilliantly lighted. In a corner sat an eager crowd around a little roulette-table. On divans and easy chairs the remainder of the company laughed and chatted. Minna was the centre of a little group of men, two bald, scrupulously attired, wearing ribbons in their button-holes. One was telling a story. By the guffaws that followed, and by the way in which Minna held her fan before her face, Gerard guessed its nature. He glowered at her. As French was spoken, which he understood very badly, he felt an added sense of outrage.

A stout lady in mauve and rubies left the roulette and came over to Minna.

"Present to me your tame bear, my dear," she said in a shrill falsetto. "He is sulking because no one is making him dance."

Minna laughed, glanced at Gerard and met his lowering look. Then she bit her lip. It was ridiculous for a man to behave so foolishly. She rose, resigned her seat to the lady, and walked with her slow, languid step to Gerard.

"Madame Raborski is dying to make your acquaintance."

Idols

"It would be a good thing to let her die," said Gerard.

"Well, she will soon. Grant her this last favour."

Annoyance screwed his features. "I can't talk inanities to rouged women," he said.

"You can talk them to me."

"You're not rouged. If you were, I shouldn't."

"I don't think you ought to speak in this way of my friends," she remarked.

"I suppose I am rude, and I beg your pardon. But they're not your friends. They are a troupe of mountebanks whom you engage to entertain you. Come out on to the loggia."

"And catch my death of cold? No, thank you."

"You have scarcely spoken a word to me all the evening."

"I speak to those who amuse me."

"With blackguardly French stories."

"That's my affair."

"I don't like to see those fellows leering at you," he said, sulkily.

To such a point of intimacy had three weeks' intercourse brought them. Minna broke into the low notes of her laughter.

"Why shouldn't they? It pleases them and doesn't hurt me. And *vice versa*. Also, you know, I'm not a monopolisable woman. If you'll go and talk nicely to Madame Raborski, I'll let you give me some supper."

Idols

“ All right,” he said; “ where is the siren ? ”

She conducted him to the group, performed the introduction. He bowed with the Englishman's stiffness. The other men politely made place for him. He sat down and endured a quarter of an hour's anguish. Minna joined the roulette-players, where Mrs. Delamere was staking on even chances, according to an infallible system in which one only plays every tenth or fifteenth game. It suited her purse and protracted the excitement. After winning a few hundred francs, Minna released Gerard from Madame Raborski, who had been trying to create an impression. But the supper-room was full; the hostess became the centre of flowery compliment, delivered with much uplifting of shoulders and spreading of thin bejewelled hands. Gerard chafed and felt his own great fingers tingle. He was not a man accustomed to the amenities of society. During his domesticated days, he went out with Irene only under compulsion. Women bored him, save those whom he appropriated to himself. Then he preferred seclusion with the chosen individual. Among these easy-mannered adventurers and satirical, sharp-witted women, he seemed as uncouth as a bear in a wilderness of monkeys. The comparison was Minna's, in an after talk with Mrs. Delamere. Consciousness of his lack of adaptability did not soothe his temper. He felt annoyed with himself for coming.

“ Don't look so glum,” whispered Minna. “ Give

Idols

me some of that pâté and look after the truffles." He helped her solemnly, and brought the plate to the corner of the table where she was sitting. Then stood by her, at attention, while she jested with her neighbours. When she had finished, he escorted her to the salon, where she left him to join a handsome woman, in a very low dress, who was playing the piano. Mrs. Delamere, who had abandoned the roulette-table, took pity on him, and sat down with him on a divan against the wall. Being an Englishwoman of his own class, she could make herself companionable, and draw him on to his own subjects, the fortune he had made, the big game he had shot. She had known Freewintle, the mighty hunter with whom he had been associated, and gave satirical sketches of his family history. She was an authority on genealogies, a subject which, by one of the intellectual freaks not uncommon in men of Gerard's type, interested him greatly. It is a curious fact, but a true one, that all genealogists are related to one another. Mrs. Delamere conclusively proved her connection with the Norfolk Merriams through the Freewintles. They were all East Anglians.

"You have done me good, Mr. Merriam," she remarked. "I had almost forgotten that there was such a thing as a county family in existence. Look at these people here—I suppose they belong to somebody—but to whom?"

Idols

"If they had mothers, it's about all," replied Gerard, laughing. Mrs. Delamere had put him into a good humour. Soon afterwards he took his leave.

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" he asked Minna, while bidding her good-bye.

"Perhaps—I don't know. If I go over to Monte Carlo you may meet me there. There are too many burdens in life to add to them voluntarily by making arrangements for the morrow."

"You are looking tired," he said. "A course of late hours and stuffy rooms becomes unhealthy if it's overdone. Let me take you for a drive to-morrow."

"With Mrs. Delamere?"

"No. You alone. I can get a decent turn-out in Nice, I suppose. I'll call for you at two o'clock."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Grande Bretagne."

"I'll send you word in the morning. It depends how I feel."

"I shall be wretchedly disappointed if you don't come."

"Will you?" she said with her lazy intonation.

"*Nous verrons.*"

Later, when the guests had gone, Mrs. Delamere began to sound Gerard's praises. He was a thorough Englishman, intelligent, masculine. Not like the effeminate creatures who had never seen a gun go off in their lives or ridden anything more spirited than a

Idols

Turbie donkey. He was like a colossus amid these little men, she said, with a vague reminiscence of Shakespeare. It was then that Minna snapped out her bear and monkey comparison. She was thoroughly weary, lay back exhausted and spiritless in a chair, and regarded Gerard's apologist with an air of tired resignation. The room was hot and stale with the breaths of many people, and the refuse of many perfumes.

"Bear or not," replied Mrs. Delamere, drawing some crumpled and greasy bank notes from the pocket of her black silk dress, and delicately folding them, "I like to meet an honest, healthy English gentleman again. And I pity the man. I always pity men whose wives go wrong."

"Pearls before swine," said Minna, listlessly.

"Oh, I am not so hard as that upon the women."

"You mistake my meaning," said Minna. "He is the hog."

Mrs. Delamere looked up surprised.

"I thought you disliked her so. And you certainly have been encouraging him."

Minna drew her body together in a kind of shudder, and threw out her hand in a gesture of repulsion.

"He gives me the creeps!" she said.

Mrs. Delamere did not reply. She rose and gathered her gloves and fan from a table where they were lying, and then came calmly up to Minna's chair.

"You are overdone. It is time for bed."

Idols

She was not without kindly instincts. In her placid, well-bred way, she stooped and put her arm beneath Minna's and helped her to rise. She stood for a moment without withdrawing her arm.

"You are leading a weary life, my poor child," she said.

Minna looked at her for a minute. Her lips quivered.

"Oh! a hell of a life," she whispered.

And to Mrs. Delamere's consternation, the girl gave one or two little convulsive sobs and, turning swiftly, burst into miserable crying upon her shoulder.

"I wish I were dead. I can't find peace or happiness anywhere. It is a hell of a life!"

The elder woman soothed her as best she could. Eventually Minna dried her eyes, kissed, for the first time, her friend's faded cheek, and went out of the room.

"Why is it," said Mrs. Delamere to herself, "that when a woman wants to go to the devil, she always does so by water?"

Gerard was up early the next morning, and after enquiries went in search of a respectable turn-out for the proposed drive. He found a high American phaeton and a pair of Irish ponies which the livery stable keeper had recently purchased from a dissipated young Englishman who, having ruined himself at the tables, had hurriedly hastened to England to enlist in

Idols

a foot regiment. On returning towards the Public Gardens, he encountered his club acquaintance sitting outside the Café de la Victoire. He joined him in an *apéritif*, described his recent hire. The friend smiled indulgently.

"I suppose it's for the Queen of Sheba."

Gerard frowned surprise. "Who's that?"

"The girl I've seen you with several times. They call her that, I suppose, because she's wealthy, dusky, and indiscreet."

"I used to know her in London long ago," said Gerard, stiffly.

Suddenly the man remembered, flushed, and apologised.

"I'm awfully sorry. A thousand pardons. But one gets into a bad way of talking of public characters—and unfortunately every one talks of the lady by that name."

Gerard sipped his vermouth coolly.

"What do you know about her?"

"Oh, nothing much. Really—I——"

"It would rather interest me to learn," insisted Gerard.

"Well, she squanders a lot of money at the tables. And then she's always attached to some new man or the other. Somewhat speckled, you see, in reputation. Introduction not necessary. That sort of thing. I don't know if it's true. I hope not."

Idols

"Oh, I suppose it's true," said Gerard. "Women generally live a bit below their reputation."

"I'm glad my indiscretion was not serious," said his friend.

"Oh, dear, no," laughed Gerard; and, turning the subject aside, "If you are doing nothing you might as well come and have some lunch with me at the Grande Bretagne."

The friend assented. They strolled off together. At the hotel, the hall-porter gave Gerard a note which had just arrived. It was a line from Minna promising to be ready for the drive. He felt by no means displeased by his friend's gossip; if anything, rather more settled in his mind. A beautiful and courted woman with several thousands a year commanded deference. The Queen of Sheba, of Monte Carlo scandal, on the other hand, was fair game. And the ease of the chase appealed to a man who was too masculine in his tastes to have cultivated the delicate gallantries of philandering. He crushed the note roughly into his pocket.

"A put off?" queried his friend.

"I guess not," replied Gerard fatuously.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHY Minna sent the note of acquiescence she herself could not tell. Her caprices were past accounting for. Vanity had its share. The man whom she had regarded as the most contemptuous and remote of a priggish society was now at her feet. Revenge prompted her to pay her ancient grudge against that society by kicking him as he grovelled. Again, desperate satiety drove her to new sensations. And lastly, a reaction from her expansiveness of the night before set her obstinately counter to Mrs. Delamere's somewhat injudicious advice to remain within doors.

She kept him waiting in the loggia for half an hour, while the ponies stamped and rattled their bits below. At last she appeared, dressed in her flaring daffodil-yellow costume, which she had not worn since her original encounter with him. She met him somewhat defiantly, without apology for her delay.

"Do I look decent?" she enquired nonchalantly of Mrs. Delamere, who had been keeping Gerard company.

"You look ripping," said Gerard.

She signed to him that she was ready to start. He

Idols

picked up his hat and gloves from the balustrade and followed her downstairs, helped her into the high phaeton, took the reins from the man at the horses' heads, and turned out of the front gate. Then a cut of the whip sent the ponies at a dashing pace down the Cimiez Road, through the town, towards the sea.

"We will go Antibes way, along the coast," said Gerard.

"Anywhere except the Corniche road," replied Minna. "I am sick of it."

"You seem to be sick of most things. Why so? You've got money and beauty and independence. What more can you want?"

"Suppose I said I wanted somebody to understand me—some one whom I could meet soul to soul?" she said sarcastically. "Don't you ever feel that?"

He laughed, as he piloted the ponies past a company of bicyclists, at whose machines they seemed disposed to shy.

"I've heard too much of that jargon," he answered. "I've been cured of a belief in souls."

"Or if they do exist," said Minna, "people only talk of them as they do of their livers—when they are diseased."

"You began talking of yours. Is it out of order? You try it a bit, don't you?"

Hardened as Minna was, and readily as she would have laughed at the speech coming from the lips of

Idols

another man, yet in the remorseful bitterness of her heart, which this sudden association with him seemed to have swelled to sensitive tenseness, she felt his words jar through her body.

"One's own self-mockery is enough," she replied, coldly.

"Oh, come," he cried with a laugh, "we are not going to turn ourselves inside out, as if we were at a London afternoon tea and anatomy crush. It's rough on the ponies. You haven't even admired them."

As they turned on to the smooth white road between the Public Gardens and the sea, and dashed down the long Promenade des Anglais, with great clatter of hoofs and tossing of impatient heads, Gerard felt the man's pride in association with respectable horseflesh. He was in luck. Such a turn-out is not to be met with in every Riviera livery stable. And the elemental pride in temporary possession of female beauty added to his satisfaction. Yet the fact that he was driving the notorious Queen of Sheba, before the eyes of all Nice, brought a satirical smile to his lips.

"There would be a nice little scandal about, if either of us were attached," he said. "It is comfortable not to have to bother about the proprieties."

"I consider this Bayswatery in its conventionality," replied Minna. "If you look upon this as an adventure, I wonder what you'd think of anything really audacious."

Idols

"I am ready to commit any audacity. Name one."

She leaned back and twirled her parasol languishly. To see her face he had to turn his head.

"I will kiss you now if you like, *coram publico*. You're bewitching enough," he said in his rough fashion.

"The idea is unimaginative and—repulsive," replied Minna. And she began to look idly at the sea.

It was at its loveliest that afternoon, melting through all gradations from cobalt to pale turquoise, flecked with the rich tones of the brown Mediterranean sails, and meeting far ahead in a sapphire haze the dreamy stretch of the Cap d'Antibes. But Minna's thoughts were far from its intoxicating beauty. She wished she had not come for this drive. This man was getting upon her nerves. She had half intended to lash him with ridicule and set him adrift. But she lacked courage. In his last admiring glance she had read that which made her fear. Her nervousness began to grow hysterical, especially after the lapse of some minutes during which he had not spoken.

"Do say something," she said at last, irritably.

"I thought you were absorbed in the poetry of nature," he replied.

"You Englishmen are so heavy. You were scandalised at meeting a crowd of shady foreigners at my house last night. They can talk amusingly. That's why."

Idols

"An Englishman generally acts, which is better," said Gerard.

They pursued the theme for a while; then, piqued by her disadvantageous comparison, he began to make love outright. As he proceeded, her sense of loathing and of impotence increased. She scarcely spoke. Gerard took her silence for assumption of modesty; the satirical smile deepened about his lips.

The ponies went down the white road at a spanking pace. They had reached the open country and traffic was scanty. The road undulated between banks pungent with thyme and rosemary; now rose in full view of the sea and the great sweep of coast, now skirted villas nestling in the slopes that heave downwards to the shore from the cool grey Maritime Alps, shimmering against the violet sky. Swarthy, bare-legged children ran out from the wayside cottages to stare at the wheels flashing amidst the cloud of dust, and now and then a great shovel-hatted curé looked up from his greasy breviary as the English couple dashed by. Suddenly at the top of a steep incline a bicyclist whirled past them, and coasted swiftly down. The ponies shied, plunged. The phaeton was not fitted with a brake. Gerard, deep in amorous schemes and taken off his guard, slashed the ponies, tried to pull them up, bungled, with the result that they bolted furiously down the hill.

Minna, physically timid, shrieked and fastened a desperate clasp on Gerard's arm.

Idols

"All right! Hold on tight. Not my arm. Nothing will happen," he said reassuringly. The cyclist, hearing the frightened horses thundering behind him, set his feet on the pedals, put on the brake, and drifted into the hedge. The light carriage leapt and swung. Minna was terrified. In her fright she had left her parasol to the winds, and clung to Gerard's body with both hands. She was very near him; for a second he took his eyes from the tossing manes and kissed her on her open mouth. She uttered a little cry and turned aside her head. But excitement had warmed his blood. He kissed her again; she could not get beyond his reach; dared not relax her grasp for fear of instant death. He had her at his mercy. As soon as he became aware of regained control of the animals, he let them follow, for a time, their foolish course, and kissed the frenzied girl beside him over and over again, heedless of her struggles and cries.

At last came a slight ascent and Gerard's powerful arms brought the ponies to their senses. They broke into a moderate pace, and, all danger being over, Minna relaxed her hold and drew as far from Gerard as she could.

"You brute!" she cried tempestuously. "You brute! You cowardly brute!"

With a mighty wrench he pulled up the ponies at the top of the rise, and they stood trembling, spattering their chests with foam. He turned to reply to

Idols

Minna, but she rose suddenly and, before he could interfere, was clambering out of the high phaeton.

"I shall not stay a moment longer with you. I shall walk back, if I die from it."

She missed the step, and fell heavily to the ground. A peasant in a blue blouse, who was working in a little patch of garden by the side of the road, ran up and assisted her to rise. Then hailed by Gerard, he went to the horses' heads, and Gerard sprang to Minna's assistance.

"You haven't hurt yourself?"

"I have twisted my foot," she said sullenly, steadying herself by the phaeton. She was pale with anger and pain. Her veil and hat were awry, one of her gloves had split. The daffodil-yellow costume was white with dust. The consciousness of her aspect incensed her further.

"You're in a great mess," he said. And clumsily he began to brush the dust from her skirt. But she twitched it away from him with her free hand.

"Don't touch me," she said angrily. He stood up, thrust his hands in his pockets, and looked at her somewhat satirically.

"I am awfully sorry. But I'll have to do something for you, if you have twisted your foot. You can't remain there all the afternoon."

"It's better," she declared. "Leave me—go away—I can walk home."

Idols

With the words she removed her supporting hand and put her weight upon the sprained foot. But she uttered an involuntary little cry, and would have fallen, had not Gerard sprang forward and caught her.

"I'm afraid you'll have to accept my escort back," he said.

For reply she called out in French to the man who was holding the ponies.

"Is there an inn or café near by?"

The man broke into polite smiles, showing his white teeth. Effectively there was an inn, just at the turn of the road. Many visitors from Nice stopped there to eat fruit and drink coffee. Madame had hurt herself, without doubt, and wanted to rest. She would find herself quite comfortable there.

"I shall go to the inn," she said, turning to Gerard. "Perhaps you'll leave word at my house to send me a comfortable carriage. You need not come back with it."

"Oh, nonsense," he replied. "I can lift you into the phaeton and lift you out again. It's idiotic to make this fuss."

"I'd sooner crawl than drive back with you," she flashed, vindictively.

Two sturdy and swarthy peasants had meanwhile come up with the group, and pausing by the horse-tender, received a voluble account of the situation. Gerard shrugged his shoulders.

Idols

"How do you propose to get to the inn?"

"These creatures will carry me."

"I suppose you know you're making yourself supremely ridiculous?"

"I am accustomed to do what I choose," retorted Minna. "*Dites donc, vous,*" she said to the new arrivals.

They hastened to her side. Gerard moved off a few steps and lit a cigar. She explained her desires. The inborn gallantry of the children of the South manifested itself in expressions of delight. They made the military ambulance seat for her with crossed hands, took her up and set off at a brisk pace. Gerard marched behind them sardonically, cursing under his breath, and signed to the third man to follow with the ponies and phaeton. They formed a singular procession. At the turn of the road the little inn came in sight, upon the brow of an embankment overlooking the road. It was a squat white building with "*Au Séjour du Soleil*" inscribed in enormous letters across its façade. In front of it stood a ramshackle arbour of lattice work, covered with straggling vine, beneath which were rough tables and benches blistered by the sun. Leaving the carriage in the road below, Gerard followed the bearers up the steep path to the door of the inn. The place was quite deserted, save for some fowls, a goat tethered to a post, and the buxom *patronne* who was grinding coffee in the arbour.

Idols

The bearers put Minna to the ground, and she stood on one foot supporting herself between them. The landlady left her coffee, and rushed out to meet her.

"I want a room for an hour or two, where I can lie down until a carriage comes to me from Nice. This gentleman will fetch it," said Minna.

An interval of explanation and enquiry followed. Then the *patronne* entered the house to look after the room.

"You need not wait," said Minna to Gerard, coldly.

"I want to satisfy myself that you are comfortable," he replied, sitting down on one of the benches.

The landlady reappeared in smiling bustle. The room was quite ready, if Madame would deign to enter and occupy it. The two peasants took up their charming daffodil bundle and vanished into the house, from which they emerged a moment or two afterwards with glowing faces. Gerard responded to their low bows and profuse acknowledgments of Monsieur and Madame's generosity, with an Englishman's impatient nod, and continued to swear softly to himself as he smoked. He rose and walked to and fro before the inn, chafing at the ignominious position in which Minna had placed him. Like most men of somewhat flaccid fibre he cursed, now that it was too late, his folly in yielding to her caprice. If he had taken her up bodily and set her in the phaeton and driven off

Idols

with her, this tomfoolery would have been avoided. As for tamely going back for the carriage, it was out of the question. He would see her, at any rate, before he started, and try to bring her to a state of reason. He was not the man to slink off with his tail between his legs, after a slapped face, like a certain little cur of a Frenchman whom he remembered. Her tantrums were preposterous. She, the Queen of Sheba, to put on the prude for a few snatched kisses! He laughed disagreeably. His pride and his passions were armed allies. But he was not free from some pricks of compunction with regard to her accident. He had not intended to behave brutally, and yet his solicitude had not been very tenderly manifested.

"But, confound it, it's her own fault," he exclaimed, with a stamp of his foot.

Ten minutes passed. He waited for a glimpse of the *patronne*. At last he caught sight of her in the public room of the inn. She came, at his summons, to the door. In his bad French, he explained his desire to see the invalid. Nothing doubting as to his right, the woman bustled before him, and throwing open the door of a room, bade him enter. He strode boldly in. The chamber was rather dark, owing to the shutters being closed against the westering sun. A wooden table, a huge press, and a great four-post bed with white curtains took up most of the space. On the bed lay Minna, with rumpled hair, her feet cov-

Idols

ered with a shawl. A shoe and a stocking lying on the table by her hat, showed that her hurt had been tended. She rose, indignantly, to a sitting posture as he entered.

"What have you come here for? Why haven't you gone for the carriage? I can't stay here all night."

"I want to make friends first," he said mildly.

"Come, let us forget this little episode. You are angry with me for kissing you. Well, you know, Minna, I wouldn't have kissed you if I hadn't cared for you, and if you hadn't been so lovely and so near to me."

"Oh, go, for goodness' sake," she said, twining her fingers together, nervously. His presence seemed to suffocate her.

"No, I am not going," he answered, with sudden temper. "I am not the sort of man to be ordered about. I am not going to stir a foot until we literally kiss and make friends. You know perfectly well I have fallen in love with you. I wanted to have you all by yourself to-day to tell you so. So I tell you. I love you, and I insist on being heard."

"*You* love me?" she said with great contempt. "You look like it!"

She jerked herself backwards so as to find support against the pillows as she sat.

"What do you propose to do?" she asked him, with an ugly look on her face.

Idols

As a matter of fact, he had made no plans whatever, the *rôle* of theatrical libertine never having come within his experience. But her question gave an opening for the brute that necessarily lingers in most men.

"I'll stay here all night, until you kiss me of your own free will."

"I have always thought of you as a coward," she said. "I suppose that's a threat to compromise me. It won't do me much harm, I assure you."

He threw his hat and gloves on the table and came close to the bedside. The brute led him on. Her beauty had captivated him. Her scorn angered him. His shifty blue eyes gleamed.

"If you don't do what I ask—it's a very small thing—I'll take it by force and I'll stay here all night, and I'll follow you wherever you go and see you every day, until you come to your senses. I love you and I'm not going to be trifled with. And I'm damned if you can say you have given me no encouragement."

He bent forward. She thought he was going to throw his arms round her. All the pent-up hatred of him, all the fermenting elements of self-loathing, remorse, and despair, all the agonising recrudescence of hopeless, passionate love for the man that was and was not her husband, found vent in a hoarse inarticulate cry. And then she lost control of reason, and burst into passionate invective.

Idols

"You love me! You! You think a woman who knows what you are would have anything to do with you, save fool you and throw you aside. You who threw away a wife that was worth ten million of me, and a friend that was worth twenty million of you. I hate you. I despise you. I despise you as much as I despise myself, and that's saying a good deal." She spat the words at him: "When you were living smugly with your wife, you looked down upon me. Now you have got rid of her, you come to me like a brute and a coward."

"You'll kindly leave Mrs. Merriam out of the discussion," said Gerard sardonically.

"She's the whole question," cried Minna. "She and nothing else—she who has been my burning torture and shame for four years. Do you think, because I live recklessly like a wanton woman, that I can't feel degradation? And you shall feel it too. You fool! You worse than fool! She was as pure as a saint—as one of your Christian saints in heaven—and I was jealous of her—I didn't know her then—but you—— Do you know where Hugh Colman was that night of the murder? He was with me—all night. The thieves came in by the window I had unbolted for him. He had been married to me for nearly a year. We had quarrelled. It was my fault. I thought I hated him. Oh, God, if you knew how I love him now! Then you would know what love is!"

Idols

She paused for breath, which came pantingly. Gerard stood stiff, his eyes fixed upon her, unmoving, as if turned to stone. He passed his tongue over his lips. The enormity of his folly paralysed him. At last words came.

“What kept him silent then?”

“As if you could understand,” she cried in her passionate scorn. “The honour of the bravest man that ever lived. That night—he had seen my father’s will—all my money to go if I married a Christian—we swore to part for ever and keep our marriage secret. I kept him to his promise. I let him go through all that horror—I was coming to tell you that awful night—I was taken ill. *Your* wife saved his life, not his. And I have been in hell fire ever since.”

“And there I hope to God you’ll remain,” said Gerard in a low voice.

“You shall taste some of it with me. Go to her now and ask her to forgive you.”

“I shall order the carriage for you,” said Gerard. And without another word he turned and walked out of the room.

“He will order the carriage for me. Ha! Ha!” cried Minna.

The buxom *patronne* heard the laugh, pricked up her ears, and flew to the beautiful lady’s assistance.

CHAPTER XXIV

GERARD gave the man who was holding the ponies a five-franc piece, and drove back at a break-neck pace. Minna's revelation and taunts had set him in a frame of mind bordering on madness. He did not stop to question the truth of her statement. It cast too lurid a light upon the dark places of the mystery of four years ago. His egregious folly danced before his eyes. The wrong inflicted on a heroic woman and a loyal man loomed before him in ghastly significance. He could not hide behind sophistries. He was not a bad man, to contemplate the consequences of his actions with cynical complacency. Deep down in him lingered the conscience of the moral, if invertebrate, Briton. His conscience was appalled at the irreparable injury. Minna was suddenly transformed from the desired flesh feminine into an unthinkable Ate. Irene assumed a new radiance of martyrdom. In the searchlight that was sweeping his horizon, he saw her transcendent faith in his equal greatness of soul; saw, too, his own ignoble narrowness of comprehension. He had been a fool, besotted by his own brutality. He lashed the ponies viciously. A man

Idols

translates into external fury the shudder that a flash of self-knowledge sends through his soul.

Yet the story he had heard was amazing; compelling credence, as Tertullian has it, *quia impossibile*. All its elements were characterised by a marvellous intensity. What he had taken for a vulgar intrigue had really been a drama of fierce passions and noble heroisms, in which he alone had played a vulgar part. His gorge rose at the idea of the sorry figure he must have appeared in the eyes of each of the three.

The ponies dashed, sweating and dusty, up to the front of the Villa Benedetta, before he realised how the journey had been accomplished. Mrs. Delamere, summoned in haste, descended to meet him. Seeing him alone and agitated, and the ponies dripping, she grew pale.

"Where is Minna?"

"She has twisted her ankle. Wouldn't drive back with me. You are to send a closed landau for her at once. You will find her at the *Stjour du Soleil*, on the road before you get to Var."

"Aren't you going back with the carriage?"

"No," he replied brusquely. "You send it. You needn't be alarmed. She is not hurt."

"Then I suppose I may guess the reason——?"

"You may guess anything you choose, Mrs. Delamere," said Gerard. "Good evening." And turning the ponies, he drove off.

Idols

Half an hour later he was back in his hotel, where he spent the evening trying to face the situation. There was only one course open to him. Humiliation at Irene's feet. It was but her due. And then? He was baffled. He would offer remarriage. Perhaps she would accept. After all, he had been her husband, she his wife. In his commonplace system of ethics, the fact counted for much. But Irene was different from other women. He had a dim conception of her as something spiritual and masterful. Had she been of commoner mould, perhaps he would not have chafed at his shackles. What a worm he had been! In his chastened mood, the meanness of his eager belief in her guilt smote him sorely. He had been a blackguard all through. Gradually, as the hours passed, the atmosphere of remorse grew denser, and through it, by a kind of spiritual refraction, the illusory image of the long set sun of love appeared above his horizon.

His late pursuit of the female had, in some co-ordinating fashion, put him on the track of the feminine. The convulsion in his mind caused him to grasp at elusive supports. Remorse craved atonement. The many astounding factors in his situation, when he grew tired of considering each in turn, all combined to produce a queer, unnatural sentimentality. Without the dew of womanly sympathy, life seemed parched with sudden aridness. He lay awake that

Idols

night, deluding himself into the longing for a lost paradise. He made magnanimous resolves. He would win back Irene, humble himself before Hugh. The next day he started for London, his head swimming with sick and angry fantasies.

And meanwhile, in her darkened room at Nice, Minna was regarding the mad betrayal of her secret in dazed and despairing terror.

Two days afterwards, Gerard paused in the doorway at the foot of the familiar staircase in the Temple, where Hugh's chambers were situated, and scanned the list of names. The one he sought was still there. He hesitated for a moment, biting the ends of his moustache. His last meeting with Hugh had been unpleasant. The memory galled his pride. Perhaps it would be better to carry out an alternative plan, and obtain knowledge of Irene's whereabouts from Harroway, or from Miss Beechcroft, her aunt. His heart failed him. He winced in anticipation before the steel-blue of Hugh's eyes and the supercilious tones of his voice. Then suddenly conscious of the lack of moral courage, he threw angrily away the stump of cigar he was holding in his fingers, and mounted the stairs. The oak was unsported. He knocked; a voice bade him enter. Hugh's clerk rose from a paper-heaped desk, and advanced to meet the visitor.

Idols

"Is Mr. Colman in?"

"No, sir," said the clerk. "He hasn't been gone more than half an hour."

"When will he be back?"

"Monday morning, sir. This is Saturday. He doesn't often come to chambers on Saturday afternoons."

"Do you know where I can find him?" asked Gerard, growing impatient.

The clerk did know. Lawyer's clerks are certain about most things.

"Mr. Colman is at home, at his private residence."

"Where is that?"

"Are you a client, sir?" asked the clerk, with an air of importance.

"No, confound you," exclaimed Gerard. "My name is Merriam. Perhaps you have heard of it. What's your master's address?"

"Fifty-two Windsor Terrace, Hyde Park, sir," replied the clerk promptly.

Gerard nodded and withdrew. But for his previous hesitation, he would have gone on to Harroway. As his self-esteem, however, was piqued, he hailed a cab in the Strand, and continued his quest of Hugh in the direction indicated. He leaned over the panels, his gloves in his great sunburnt hands, and tried to distract his thoughts by contemplation of the busy thoroughfares. Their unchanged aspect impressed him

Idols

with the returned wanderer's illogical astonishment. But for his own incidented career during his absence he might have left them only yesterday. Life seemed to have stood still in London. He half pitied its stagnation. He himself had whirled through time; had made a fortune, braved countless adventures. Every day had differed from its predecessor. He had lived, while this unchanging scene had gone mechanically on, day after day, like the reiterated performance of some gigantic spectacle. The Strand, the Haymarket, Piccadilly Circus, held his attention, but when the cab turned off through the dull, decorous streets between Regent Street and Oxford Street, he leaned back in the cab, and his thoughts were again bent anxiously inwards. Again he felt the nervous reluctance to meet Hugh, tried to formulate in his mind the explanation and apology whose accomplishment was the main object of his visit. He had often styled himself, boastingly, a plain man. But a plain man is very much like a plain cook, unable to cope successfully with anything beyond the commonplace. His errand dealt with extraordinary issues. How should he fulfil it? And there was Hugh's fiery temper to be reckoned with, and his command of scathing speech. Gerard had always been just a little afraid of Hugh in the old days, and the half-acknowledged habit of timorousness still survived.

The cab drove down Oxford Street, past the Marble

Idols

Arch, and turned up one of the thoroughfares leading north. A quiet street to the left contained Windsor Terrace. Gerard alighted at Number Fifty-two, dismissed the cabman, and knocked at the door. A maid-servant opened. On seeing him, she started and looked at him in some bewilderment.

"Is Mr. Colman in?" asked Gerard.

"No, sir."

"When do you expect him?"

"Quite soon, sir."

"Could I come in and wait?"

"There is Mrs. Colman upstairs, sir," said the maid, perplexedly.

"Mrs. Colman!" echoed Gerard.

The announcement confused him. He had reckoned upon finding Hugh in bachelor quarters. He had left Mrs. Colman in Nice. For a moment or two his lip curled at a satirical thought. Probably one of Hugh's indiscretions. It was one of those houses from which the general visitor was excluded. He glanced at the servant, whose perturbation became evident. He drew out his card-case.

"Would you tell your mistress that an old friend of Mr. Colman's has very important business with him, and asks the favour to be allowed to wait until he returns?"

Jane took the card and ran up the stairs. Gerard remained in the hall. Suddenly he was aware of the

Idols

dim stirrings of past association. There was something familiar in the girl's features and voice. Of whom did she remind him? He tapped his foot irritably, seeking to get upon the track. Presently Jane returned, with a flushed face.

"Will you come up to the drawing-room, sir?"

She preceded him up the stairs, held open the drawing-room door. As she stood aside to let him pass, he again looked at her sharply. Certainly he had seen her before. She gave him no time for enquiries, for as soon as he had entered, she quickly closed the door and disappeared. Gerard walked across the tastefully furnished room, whose arrangements bore evidence of the hand of a refined woman. As he glanced round him, his eye fell upon a photograph of Irene in a silver frame. He crossed to the table on which it was, examined it closely. It was evidently quite recent. She had grown older, he thought; her face, spiritualised. He felt vaguely disappointed. The portrait did not suggest the woman crushed by contumely whose face would grow radiant at the news he was bringing her. For lately he had begun to regard himself somewhat as her deliverer. Her aspect of serenity gave him apprehensive qualms. On the same table was a photograph of Hugh, proud, with his head thrown back, looking somewhat scornfully at the beholder. In the centre, hidden from the first casual glance by a vase with flowers, was the

Idols

photograph of a pretty two-year-old boy. A dawning uneasiness, too dim as yet for suspicion, had just arisen in his mind, when, turning away from the table, he noticed upon the mantelpiece two richly chased silver candlesticks, which were strikingly familiar. They used to be Irene's most cherished possessions, heirlooms in her family. Had she given them to Hugh? Quickly he looked about the room. Against the wall hung a signed Seymour Haden that had belonged to his wife. What did it mean? Beneath stood a little cane work-basket. Scarcely aware of his purpose, he turned over the silks and spools. A fragment of paper bore a pencilled set of directions for some fancy stitch. It was in Irene's handwriting. Gerard put his hand to his forehead, drew it away moist. Some books were lying on a table. He strode impetuously thither. The top one was "*The New Atlantis*, by Hugh Colman." Gerard took it up. On the fly-leaf was written, "Irene, from Hugh." Irene, Irene everywhere.

Then swiftly the lost association connected with the servant found its place in his brain. She was one of their Sunnington servants. Her name returned to his memory—Jane, a favourite of Irene's. With a sudden exclamation of amazement, foreboding and anger, he rushed to the table with the photographs, and seeing that of the boy, scanned it intently.

At this moment the door opened and Irene herself

Idols

entered the room. She was very calm, though pale, and she looked straight into his eyes. For a moment or two they regarded one another in silence, Gerard, with his back to the light of the window, still holding the photograph.

"How do you come to be in this house?" he said, somewhat hoarsely.

"It is my own," she answered steadily. "Mine and my husband's."

"And this?"

"Is our son," said Irene.

He looked at her, stupefied by anger and lacerated vanity. The photograph fell from his fingers on to the carpet.

"You mean that he is your—protector," he said.

Irene's eyes flashed dangerously.

"I don't know what your object in coming here is. I thought it was important business. I came down to spare my husband the possible pain of an interview. It seems that you have come to insult me. Hugh is my lawful husband. We were married three years ago. If your object was to learn this, you have attained it."

She spoke haughtily, drawing herself up in all her dignity. His presence offended her. Feminine delicacies rose in hot revolt within her. Yet she could not repress an almost savage thrill at the contrast between him and the man who was now her husband.

Idols

How had she ever stupefied herself into the delusion that she loved him? He looked coarse and commonplace. A movement of his neck to free itself from pressure of the collar revealed a small mole, horribly familiar to her. She shuddered in all her being. Yet she faced him bravely.

"If that is all," she added, "we can spare each other the discomfort of further conversation."

"But it isn't all, Irene," he burst out, with genuine spirit. "I swear insult was the last thing in my thoughts. I never knew of this. I came to get your address from Colman—to ask your forgiveness. But I don't understand. Tell me. Are you really his wife?"

"I have already said so," replied Irene. "If you are come to ask my forgiveness for your action towards me, I am prepared to grant it. But—I am Hugh's wife."

"And seeing you his wife, I don't understand. Unless I have been made an utter fool of a second time by a woman."

An ugly expression passed across his face. She looked so calm, self-contained; her whole attitude suggested aloofness. He began to feel his old discomfort in her presence, accentuated by the exasperating position in which he found himself. He cursed the day that turned his steps to Minna Hart. Had this been her revenge—this out and out mockery?

Idols

"I owe you an apology," he said grimly. "I left a woman calling herself Mrs. Colman in Nice—Minna Hart. She informed me that she had been secretly married to Colman. That he had spent the night of the murder with her. I came straight from Nice here to tell you of my remorse and to offer you reparation. It seems she was lying. I humbly apologise."

He laughed the short derisive laugh of indignation, and took three or four short impatient paces to and fro. Irene's eyes flashed a second time.

"You have been fooled," she said. "She cannot be his wife, since I am."

He turned round upon her suddenly.

"Perhaps it's you that have been fooled."

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps her story is true, and I may still have the pleasure of asking for your pardon. The registers in Somerset House will tell me."

"Do you mean to accuse my husband of marrying me while his first wife was alive? I would not believe a hundred registers!"

"Either he or she must be lying," said Gerard.

"She is the liar!" cried Irene, thrilled with the magnificence of her faith. "I suppose she told it you in the same calm frame of mind as when I last saw her."

It was Irene's one ungenerosity. But a woman is not apt to choose her weapons when the man she

Idols

loves is slandered by another woman. Primitive instincts get beyond control. But her words were an illumination to Gerard.

"That very evening she came to tell us her secret."

"I will never believe it. And I would sooner die than insult him by asking. There is no need for us to talk further. I appreciate your motive in coming."

Her words were a signal of dismissal. She moved towards the bell. But quick steps were heard on the stairs, and in a moment Hugh entered the room. He stood for a second transfixed with amazement at the sight of Gerard. Then quickly recovered himself.

"What are you doing here?" he asked haughtily.

He crossed the room, and stood by Irene's side, hand on hips, looking very fiercely at his enemy. Involuntarily Irene slid her hand beneath his arm. And so the two confronted Gerard. A spasm of the old jealous envy passed through his heart. If he had been a primæval savage he would have leaped at Hugh's throat.

"I have come from the Mrs. Colman who resides at Nice," he replied.

Hugh's heart gave a great throb. For a moment the ground seemed to be slipping from under his feet. He collected himself quickly.

"Explain yourself," he said.

"I have lately had the pleasure of meeting Miss Minna Hart at Nice. She confessed to a secret mar-

Idols

riage with you, and entered upon such explanations as proved to me how baseless were my suspicions of—the present Mrs. Colman.”

“ And you came to take your revenge. It is worthy of you.”

“ Mrs. Colman will bear me out when I say that I came with other motives. Your second marriage was an entire surprise to me. As great a one as the first.”

“ But the girl was lying to you—duping you. Can’t you understand ? ” cried Irene, breathlessly, looking from one man to the other, waiting in an agony of mystification for Hugh’s indignant denial.

Hugh set his teeth and strode up to Gerard, and looked him close in the eyes.

“ Damn you ! ” he said, “ couldn’t you have spared us this ! ”

“ Then it is true ? ” cried Irene, aghast. “ That that girl is your wife—and I am not ? ”

Hugh turned quickly from Gerard, and moved a pace nearer to her, and said, with a certain sad stateliness :

“ Yes, dear, it is quite true.”

She stood for a moment or two white and trembling, as if stricken by a mortal malady. There was a dead silence. She looked at Hugh fixedly. Then she turned slowly and walked towards the door.

Gerard was frightened. The flabby conscience was wrung. This was the second time he had stabbed

Idols

her to the heart. For the moment he forgot everything save her innocence and her anguish. He overtook her in two or three sudden strides.

"For God's sake, Irene—I'm an infernal black-guard—forgive me."

But, her back towards him, she waved him away, with outstretched hand, and in a few seconds had left the room.

"Now, we two," said Hugh, drawing himself up. "What are your intentions?"

"What intentions can I have?" replied Gerard, sullenly. "You heard what I just said to Irene."

Hugh turned away with a gesture of helplessness, and catching sight of the boy's photograph lying on the floor where Gerard had dropped it, he stooped mechanically and picked it up.

"I think you had better go," he said, wearily, fingering the frame; "and if you have anything of the man left in you, you will leave her alone, and hold your tongue about all this."

"I have no object in making it public," replied Gerard.

"Very well," said Hugh, looking at the boy's portrait.

Gerard left the house, and drew a great breath on reaching the open air. He had made a fool of himself again. He had taken his revenge; had eaten the food of the humble. He wished, in a futile way, that

Idols

he had not acted on Minna Hart's confession. His Quixotic impulses had led him to ignominious upheaval among the sheep. Fate was serving him shabbily. He walked to the Marble Arch and idly entered the Park. His head was full of the past interview. Hugh Colman's attitude had produced an irritating sense of discomfort. He had attacked him in the anticipation of unmasking a villain. He had unmasked him, and found the same proud, always bitterly envied man. Furthermore, he had found himself the villain.

For a hundred yards he tried to sentimentalise over his final and irrevocable loss of Irene. But he was honest enough to abandon the attempt. He called himself a fool for his lovesick pains; consoled himself with the assurance that she never was and never could be his style. Yet he felt sick of life, sick of his blundering and ill-used self. He walked on aimlessly.

At last he found himself in the Broad Walk of Kensington Gardens. It came on to rain from a leaden March sky. He hailed a cab, entered it and closed the panels.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver, through the trap-door in the roof.

Gerard did not know. He mentioned his club. The cab started. The sudden decision brought his future plans before his mind. Somehow England

Idols

seemed a cold, tame, unattractive place. His visions of a country estate in Norfolk lost their charm. He wished he had never left Africa.

“ I’ll soon clear out of this beastly country again,” he said to himself.

CHAPTER XXV

HUGH put the boy's photograph with mechanical precision in its accustomed place, then turned away and threw himself into the nearest chair and rested his head on his hand. Now, for the first time, his heart seemed to fail him. It was stone-cold with fear, the horrible fear, of which premonitions had haunted him, off and on, during the three years of his great happiness, lest this crime which he had committed should cause him to forfeit Irene's love.

He had entered the house buoyant with hope. That morning he had received the offer of an appointment which was generally held to be the stepping-stone to the silk of the Queen's Counsel. He had rushed up the stairs, as eager as a boy, to tell Irene his news, and to see the quick flush of pleasure on her cheek. So impetuous had been his entrance that Jane, who had been awaiting his arrival with a warning word, had only reached the foot of the stairs when he opened the drawing-room door. And then the thunderbolt had fallen. He was too dazed as yet to speculate on the motives of Minna's astonishing revelation to Gerard. The bare fact was sufficient. Irene knew the miser-

Idols

able secret. The anguish in her eyes struck the whole passionate man faint and helpless.

Suddenly he roused himself with a start, walked with a firm fast stride through the open door, up the stairs and into Irene's bedroom. As he expected, she was there, on the bed, her face hidden in the pillows. Through the open window, behind the dressing-table, came the raw, damp air. She struggled to her feet and held out a deprecating hand as he advanced to her.

"Irene!" he said. His heart nearly broke over the word.

"Leave me alone a little, Hugh," she said quietly.

"I will speak with you presently. I must think."

"Hear my story first, Irene, and that will aid the judgment you will pass upon me."

"I can't judge you," she replied. "There are feelings independent of intellectual judgment."

"But hear me," he pleaded.

"I can guess it all," she said.

"I shall have to tell it soon. Why not now? You can't guess all. Every minute's delay is widening the gulf between us, dear."

"It seems to be infinitely wide already," she answered. "Why did you deceive me, Hugh? I trusted you so——"

"Because I loved you."

"Love is perfect trust," she said.

"It is also protection. You committed a crime

Idols

punishable at law for my sake. I did the same for yours."

"Do you suppose I would have let anything stand in the way of our union?" she said.

"I knew that you would not, dear. But I also knew that such unions are hard for the woman. I wanted to lighten your lot, not make it heavier."

She shook her head, despairingly unconvinced. A word of anger, a note of passion, would have drawn from him passionate entreaties. Her self-contained and hopeless calm threw him back, as it were, upon himself.

"Well. Perhaps you had better tell me now. Not here. It is cold."

She shivered, glanced at the window, and for the first time noticed that it was open.

"My poor child!"

He lowered the sash quickly, and caught up a brown shawl that lay over the back of a couch, and held it ready to slip round her shoulders. But she refused it, saying that she would be warm downstairs.

"I have carried you in it before now, Renie," he said. "The first time—after the boy was born."

"That was long ago—in a different state of existence. Oh, Hugh, how could you live a lie like this?"

"Come and I will tell you," he said.

They went downstairs to the library. Jane met them with enquiries as to the lunch that had been

Idols

awaiting Hugh's return. Their eyes questioned one another.

"You can clear it away, Jane," he said.

Irene allowed him to perform his usual little courtesies of tenderness in making her comfortable before the fire, and thanked him in the even voice that smote him deeper than anger or fierce reproach. He stood beside her, hands on hips, his customary attitude.

"Shall I begin from the beginning? Well, it is the usual thing. Adam set the example, stereotyped the excuse. The woman tempted me. A man is a threadbare creature when you hold him up to the light. Or to put things another way: I loved a star—the better part of me; the lower part plucked the first wayside flower to hand——"

He broke off, paced impatiently the verge of carpet adjoining the polished strip of floor that ran from the doorway to the fireplace wall.

"I can't talk of it to you. It is horrible. I loved you all the time, remember. I behaved like a black-guard to her. I don't want to justify myself——"

He paused, as if expecting her to reply, but she looked steadfastly at the fire and gave no sign of heeding. The lines had deepened in her face, the youth had gone out of it. Her age was two and thirty. She looked five years older.

"I am going into rhodomontades," he said. "I will just tell you the facts."

Idols

He began at his first meeting with Minna, described their courtship, marriage, quarrel, the whole miserable story of their lives. He sought neither to spare himself nor to paint himself in Mephistophelian colours. Too proud to plead extenuation, he forced himself to state facts baldly. A note of pleading in his voice might have touched the tenderer chords in Irene, but his tale left her cold, angered, her heart unconvinced. When he had finished he sat down in the chair opposite her, and there was a long silence.

"Do you still reproach me so bitterly for deceiving you?" he asked at length.

She looked round at him wearily. She had not spoken a word since he had begun his tale.

"I can't reproach you for being different from what I thought you. You acted well, my reason tells me, according to your lights, but—I thought your lights were different. At first I could not conceive how you left me in ignorance. I need not say that if you had told me the woman was your wife, I should not have questioned you further."

"The words were on my lips," he said, leaning forward, with anxious, earnest face. "You checked them—the evening that you told me of your love. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember," she said. Then, after a pause, resuming the mid-thread of her last remark:

Idols

"But I can understand now from what you have told me of yourself. No, I don't reproach you."

He threw himself, in an outburst of gratitude, on his knees beside her chair, and seized her hand.

"God bless you, Renie. I still have your love."

She withdrew her hand gently.

"That is what I don't know, Hugh. Some you must have, for the boy's sake. Some because of your tenderness and devotion to me. But what I gave you this morning when you kissed the boy and myself before you started—seems to have gone out of me——"

"But, Irene, my beloved," he urged, with the pathos of ineptitude, "I did it for the best—for the sake of your name and happiness—for the sake of the children that might be—the danger seemed utterly remote—it seemed only taking upon myself the burden of a crime—I never breathed to you a word of the love and longing that tortured me until you showed me that you loved me. And then I took this step—the only dishonourable thing I have done in my life that my conscience approved of. My motives were pure. It was for your happiness."

"I know," she sighed. "I am not an irrational woman. It was not the selfish motive of having me yours. My reason approves you. But something has stopped in my heart—I don't know what it is or why it is."

"Time will set it on its old motion again," he said.

Idols

"No, I think not. I had the trust in you that a more religious woman has in God. Now it has gone."

"But you tell me your reason approves," insisted poor Hugh.

"Faith is on a different plane from reason. I am hurting you. It goes to my heart to do it. But I can't pretend."

Hugh rose, and, stooping over her, kissed her forehead.

"I will leave you to yourself to-day, if you wish it."

"You would be doing me a kindness, Hugh," she replied.

He left her, and betook himself to the library of his club, where, surrounding himself with books and sheets of manuscript, he made a pretence of work a barrier against intrusive acquaintances.

Irene went upstairs to the nursery, and, dismissing the nursemaid, took the boy on her lap, and drew her arms tightly round him. The tears came from an overfull heart and trickled down upon the chubby cheek. He disengaged himself and looked her in the face, and then, reminiscent of a lugubrious story that Susan had been telling him:

"Is daddy dead?" he asked with cheerful sympathy.

"No, darling. He——"

Idols

She could not say more. A lump rose in her throat.

"Then why are you crying, mummy? Have you been naughty?"

She laughed, caught him to her breast again.

"We are all miserable sinners, Hughie, save you. And you are the dearest mother's angel that ever lived."

She remained with him for the rest of the day, seeking material distraction in his childish interests and needs, and finding the crushed woman's solace in his near and happy presence. Yet the beloved sight of him brought pain. He was nameless, a child of Hagar. Already his future years had been weighted with his mother's public dishonour. Now, if this thing were noised abroad, the burden of illegitimacy was added. The maternal instinct rose, revolted, and raised up resentment against Hugh.

In the evening she put the boy to bed and sat by him as he slept. What would be the outcome of it all? She rested her head upon the edge of the pillow, and tried to think. In the first blank agony of that afternoon, there had come into her head a wild idea of leaving Hugh, and living her broken life in solitude. Perhaps the suggestion had been too fantastic to be called an idea. She had been visited by obscured gleams of visions, in which she had seen herself now flying on foot from the house, now sitting at a window in a sea-coast cottage, with the boy at her side.

Idols

Afterwards she recognised that these were but pictures of a brain momentarily disordered. Even if her own heart did not bid her pity Hugh, the boy was a sacred bond between them, not to be broken by any change in their outer lives. Whatever happened, they would continue to live as man and wife before the world, carrying on the lie. To her transparent nature deceit was abhorrent. She had the blemish of her qualities.

And her love for Hugh? She strained her spiritual vision, saw things distortedly, out of perspective. The woman of flesh and blood also suffered. A certain grandeur of cold and cruel loveliness had invested her conception of her of the ophidian eyes, and had stirred in her bosom, not jealousy, but a feminine thrill of triumph. Far different were her feelings with reference to Minna. How could the high-souled gentleman have fallen a victim to the tawdry wiles of one so commonplace and vulgar? The intrigue debased him in her eyes. It quenched in her image of him that suffused radiance of idealism and spirituality which had always existed. What she had said was true. The divinity in which she had trusted had faded into nothingness. Her soul put forth its hands for support, and found none; it was groping in darkness. . . .

The boy stirred in his sleep. She slid one hand beneath the bed-clothes and soothed him. The other touched the little crumpled hand, that gradually closed

Idols

round her finger. The action seemed symbolical. A passionate tumult of maternal emotion swelled her heart. The tears started again to her eyes. For a long time she sat, quite still, absorbed as it were in the soul of the sleeping child.

Something strange had taken place. She felt the relief of returning strength. She rose, kissed the breath of the parted, innocent lips, and retired to her own room. When Hugh, an hour afterwards, came home, he entered noiselessly and advanced a pace or two on tip-toe. Her placid, regular breathing told him that she slept. He withdrew as gently as he had entered, and went to bed.

The next day was Sunday. They met at breakfast. She approached him, and offered her cheek to his kiss.

"Only that, Irene?" he asked, with his hand on her shoulder.

"I shall always give you all that is in me to give," she replied. "You must try to be content."

He turned away sorrowfully, and sat down to table. Presently he told her how he had entered her room last night, and found her sleeping. It had made him happier.

"I was with Hughie all day," she explained, with feminine suppression of connective links.

"He is a comfort to you?"

"A new comfort," she said.

Idols

The day passed tolerably enough, and the next and the next. Their outer life remained unchanged. Yet it was the simulacrum of the old. She met him with gentle kindness, uttering no word of reproach, and manifesting a tender interest in his concerns and comforts. But the unassayable essence of their union had gone. She had grown reserved, self-contained. Hugh bowed his head beneath his punishment. He recognised the futility of pleading. Once more she took her place among the cold stars, hopelessly remote. The stamp of finality seemed impressed upon their relations. And the hunger for ~~that which~~ could never be came into his eyes.

They rarely spoke of the disintegrating cause. Once she asked him whether he feared public exposure. He reassured her. The man would be a devil if he blabbed such a secret abroad, considering the awful peril in which he would place her. The other would keep silent for her own sake. Why she had confided in Gerard was a mystery.

"You must seek the motive in love or hate," said Irene.

"Hate, then."

"I would not be too sure," said Irene, who had tasted the bitter fruit of knowledge. "A woman can have strange jealousies."

"You need not fear," he said.

But her words gave poignancy to gnawing misgiv-

Idols

ings. He had counted so absolutely on Minna's silence. Now, who could tell of what vindictive folly she was capable?

"My mind is easy, Hugh," she replied. "I have faith in my destiny."

He looked enquiringly. "As the boy's mother," she explained.

So things went on until one evening, when, in consequence of a long-standing invitation, the Harroways dined with them. Harroway took Hugh into a corner before dinner. His face was beaming.

"I have seen Merriam. He has told me. I want to fling myself on my knees before your wife. Believe me, I have all along had terrible doubts—ask Selina. It makes me feel young again."

"What did he tell you?" asked Hugh, anxiously.

"Simply that he had discovered his error. He thought I ought to know. I'm glad I'm not in his shoes. I'd shoot myself—by George, I would, sir!"

"He told you nothing about the source of his information?"

"No, my dear boy. Of course not. Oh, he's straight enough, in his way, is Gerard. He's pretty miserable about it. He's off to California next week—to buy a ranch and settle down, he says. So your paths won't cross again. I was to give you that message."

Idols

Hugh felt relieved. Gerard's presence in London caused him an oppression which he had not been able to shake off.

"I am glad we are clear in the eyes of you two, at last," he said.

"You have always been clear in our hearts, my dear Hugh," said the old solicitor.

But in spite of Hugh's relief, and that of Irene, who had been wept and smiled over by Selina upstairs, the dinner had not the usual success of their little reunions. Irene looked tired. Hugh's efforts at entertainment lacked spontaneity. Both exerted themselves, and were conscious of exertion. After the guests had gone, they sat a while together in the drawing-room.

"I suppose Mrs. Harroway told you?" said Hugh.

"Yes. It's the best thing that can happen to us," she answered. He assented gloomily. She stole a wistful glance at him, and pitied him for his downfall. She longed as yearningly as he for the dead day's departed grace. But it could never come back. Forgiveness implies raising or lowering of respective planes. Where one forgives, one cannot worship. Neither can one feel outside the limit imposed by temperament. It was not given to her to love frail mortality with the sacred fire. Her mother, father, the old idolon of Gerard she had worshipped. Hugh

Idols

she had loved with a newly-awakened elemental passion, but had worshipped him also. The whole devotion would never return. Her heart was moved by the pity of it. And yet what could she do? In her heart she was grateful to him for his tender courtesy, and his perception of her soul's workings. It made their common life tolerable, by giving her breathing space, time to realise herself, and once more to reconstruct a new life upon the ruins of an old one.

To cheer him, she gave him an account of her day's doings, of the day's oddities and signs of progress in the boy. Demanded his news, touched on the new appointment. For he had come home late, just in time to dress for dinner, and they had not seen each other alone since the morning. Then she rose and bade him good night.

"Good night. God bless you," he said.

For some moments he sat in a brown study, meditating over the change that a few days had wrought in his paradise. The haughtiness of spirit that had enabled him all his life long to face his own misdeeds and to scorn their consequences, was crushed. Irene had never been so unutterably dear. He felt humbly grateful for her kindness.

He rose with a sigh, stretched himself, and after turning out the lights in the drawing-room, went downstairs to the library, intending to do an hour's work before going to bed. He lit a cigarette, sat

Idols

down, and opened the brief-bag that he had brought home. With a handful of documents, he drew out an unopened evening paper. He arrayed the documents before him, then unfolded the newspaper, and leaning back in his chair glanced idly up and down the columns. Suddenly his eye became riveted to the page, his face grew white, and then he fell forward, elbows on table, and sat staring in front of him, digging his nails into his cheeks.

His back was to the door. He was not conscious that Irene, in dressing-gown and with loose hair, had entered the room.

"Did I leave my book down here?" she asked, mentioning a new novel.

The sound of her voice startled him. He turned round, dazed. She came towards him, caught sight of his face beneath the shaded gas-light, and uttered a little cry of fear, for it was ghastly, and his eyes were bloodshot. He beckoned her. She approached and read over his shoulder the lines to which his finger pointed.

"A tragic sequel to the celebrated Sunnington murder is reported from Nice. Miss Minna Hart, the daughter of the late Israel Hart, Esquire, was found dead in her bed this morning. An empty bottle that had contained chloral was found by her bedside. Whether death was the result of an accident or not is not yet ascertained."

Idols

But they knew. He turned in his chair, and they looked in silence at one another. The dead girl seemed to rise up between them. For a moment they were strangers.

"It was I that killed her," he said.

"Yes, it was you."

The words came mechanically from her lips. They crushed the man who lay back in his chair, broken and helpless, with all the old pride gone.

"Then I had better follow her," he said, staring moodily in front of him.

There was a long, long silence. Irene looked at him, her hand to her breast as if to suppress tumultuous workings. In the second and greater crash of her illusions she had not felt the spasm of horror and revulsion. She had only mourned the desecration of the sun in her heaven. Her idol had been transmuted into clay, and she had seen herself bereft of the god to whom she referred all the promptings of her soul. Her chief sensation had been amazed self-pity, in which her broader sympathies had no part. The moment of utter separation from him brought a flash of insight, and she saw him as he was, a man confessed—erring, high-minded, weak, patching up honour with dishonour, striving after noble ends by base means, a contrast of opposites, a fusion of granite and "a measure of shifting sand, from under the feet of the years."

Idols

"I have made a ghastly failure of life," he said, "but I can't live without your love."

He raised his eyes. The great pain in them, unlike any anguish she had dreamed of, smote her suddenly, and, like a magician's staff, opened all the fountains of her nature through which her woman's tenderness gushed forth. She rushed to him, knelt by his side, clinging to him passionately, sobbing and weeping.

"Forgive me, dear, forgive me. All my life and love are yours to help and comfort you."

The tremendous revelation had come. She, the woman, was strong. He, the man, was weak. It was for her to protect and guide him through life. She felt a thrill with it as she strained him to her heart.

It was the vivid solution of her life's problem, one diametrically opposed to the processes she had blindly followed. In the pulsating happiness of finding her warm human love for him coursing through her veins, she accepted it with tearful gratitude. The god was lost in the weak, proud man, to whom she represented the infallible and divine. It was for her to lead, for him to follow.

They sat long together, side by side, on this night of shock and reconciliation.

"God help us all who drift," said Hugh.

"Love will guide, dear," she answered.

"Who guided her?" he asked, motioning to the paper.

Idols

"We cannot judge her," said Irene.

They were nearer in thought than they had ever been, as they held silent communion over the pitiful tragedy that had shaken their lives. For each felt that its cause lay not altogether in despair at having betrayed a vital secret to a deadly enemy, who would use it to deprive her of her fortune; that it lay deeper in the roots of a human soul. For a woman, heart-poisoned by the cup of life that she drank, with its seething ingredients of love, jealousy, bitterness, fear, despair, avarice, self-contempt, hate, weariness, remorse, sense of wrong received and dealt, the curse of race, the taint of wantonness, the flavours of nobler things, late added—curdling sourly in the draught—a woman so sickened to her death, is capable of many inconsistencies, and claims at least the grave pity of the merciful.

"Will you forgive me for saying those cruel words?" asked Irene, at last. "They came from me, I don't know how."

He took her in his arms.

"It is I that need the forgiveness."

"There is only one thing I would not forgive you for."

"And that?"

"Ceasing to love me," she replied.

And so they passed together out of the shadows,

Idols

into the light of day. But it was the day of April greys and sunlight that is Life, and not the June glory that is Illusion. Irene's eyes were opened; but if her outlook was more sombre, the ground beneath her feet was more secure. A sense, too, of aloneness came, but, womanlike, she hid it in her heart, and the man walked with her unwitting, with regained buoyance of step. An erring, faulty woman, yet of stronger stuff than the impetuous man she loved so deeply, she felt at times a pathetic longing for the old blind worship. At such times she would look wistfully at her boy, asking herself a foolish question; and her sweet human frailty sought to read the answer in the child's unfathomable eyes.

3.28

THE END.

MERCANTILE LIBRARY.
NEW YORK.

54
5
TW





